

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Teen Wolf (TV)
Relationship:	Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski
Character:	Stiles Stilinski , Derek Hale , Scott McCall , Kira Yukimura , Jackson Whittemore , Claudia Stilinski , Sheriff Stilinski , Elias Stilinski , Mason Hewitt
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics , Mates , Alpha Stiles , Alpha Derek , Angst with a Happy Ending , ALL THE STILES FEELS. ALL OF THEM. , Enemies to lovers to friends who are in love and have a stable loving relationship , there's no tag for that though so I'm going with enemies to friends to lovers , Minor Ethan/Stiles Stilinski , Minor Heather/Stiles Stilinski , Minor Jennifer Blake/Derek Hale , internalized homophobia in an a/b/o context , homophobia in an a/b/o setting , One use of a homophobic slur , cancer mention , Death of minor characters , eventual orphan stiles , stiles stilinski & mason hewitt friendship , Slow Build
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A Different Kind

by [yodasyoyo](#)

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Summary

They lie there, Derek sprawled on his back and Stiles spread out on top of him, both panting heavily. Stiles is horribly aware of the way Derek's chest heaves, the feel of all that firm muscle pressed up against him; leaning up on one hand Stiles stares down, meeting Derek's gaze. The sweet smell of wet grass is in the air, but this close it's a background note to another, more familiar scent: Dove soap, Axe, and under that something rich and musky. It makes Stiles' stomach twist. He can hear the soft pitter patter of rain as it drums against his helmet, can almost see their breath mingling on each exhale. Eyes still locked, Stiles wets his lips with his tongue, and Derek's gaze drops immediately to follow the motion.

"Come on," Coach calls, clapping his hands together. "Is this a scrimmage or are you trying to get second base, Stilinski?"

Swearing under his breath, Stiles rolls off Derek immediately and gets to his feet. For maybe the first time ever, he and Derek ignore each other for the rest of the practice.

Notes

Title taken from Skinny Love (I've been listening to the Birdy version a lot while writing this)

This fic has a shit ton of angst, but it will have a happy ending. I'm trying to tag for things, but if you feel I've missed something then please let me know.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

“Hey! Hey, Hale! Wait!” Stiles scrambles out of his jeep, slamming the door shut behind him. Derek’s almost at the alleyway that runs between his apartment building and the one next door, but he stops, half turns. It’s early evening and a nearby street lamp sputters to life-- on, off, on, off, and then, definitively, on again. In it’s pale orange glow, Derek’s face is half cast in shadow.

“What? Did I leave something in your piece of shit car?”

Stiles stumbles back a step, stung. “No.”

“Then what?” His eyes flit to Stiles’ and hold his gaze, the challenge in them unmistakable.

“I just--” Stiles’ mouth works soundlessly. “Is that it?”

Derek laughs dully. “What were you expecting?” His shoulders sag as he says it, the fight leaving him, and perversely, that’s what ignites a spark of pure rage in Stiles.

“Oh my god,” he says, storming forward. “This is so fucking typical of you.”

Derek’s eyebrows climb towards his hairline and he takes a step back in surprise. “Of me?”

“Yes. You,” Stiles says, jabbing him in the chest with a finger.

“God.” Derek barks out a laugh. “I don’t know what you want--”

“You don’t know?” Stiles mocks, and shoves him; Derek stumbles back a step.

It's like a switch has been flicked; Derek's eyes narrow. "This isn't JV lacrosse anymore, Stilinski. Push me again. I dare you."

When it comes to Derek, Stiles never could resist a dare.

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"Lookit, Dad!" Stiles rips his hand from his mom's grasp, and races across the Sheriff's station towards his father on stubby legs, dodging deputies and skidding past wheeled office chairs like he was born to it.

"Woah," his dad says, scooping Stiles up in his arms and swinging him up into a big hug. "What have you got there, kiddo?"

"I drew you," Stiles says, waving the slightly crumpled piece of paper in his dad's face. "And mom and me. That's our house, and that's your hat, and that's an octopus."

"An octopus?"

"Yeah." Stiles nods furiously. "I want an octopus now." He beams at his dad hopefully, but his dad just smiles fondly and ruffles his hair.

Wrinkling his nose, Stiles reaches out and plucks the sheriff's hat off his dad's head, placing it on his own, where it immediately slips down almost covering his eyes.

"He watched a documentary on the Discovery Channel," his mom says, as she joins them, reaching out to tilt the hat back a little, so Stiles can see.

"And now a pet octopus is all he can talk about. I told him we would need a big fish tank, and that's too expensive."

"We could keep it in the bath," Stiles says hopefully. "That's already big."

“They need saltwater.”

“You can buy salt at the store.” Stiles juts his chin out.

“But then what would you do when you need to take a bath?” asks his mom.

“Pffff. Nobody *needs* to take a bath,” Stiles says scornfully, and his mom throws her hands in the air.

“Three years old, and our son already has an answer for everything.”

“Sorry, kiddo,” says his dad, with an apologetic grin. “You might not need a bath, but you’re mom and I do occasionally. You know what though?” He holds up Stiles’ drawing. “I think that this is the best picture I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah?!”

“Absolutely. I’m gonna get it framed and put it on my desk.” He points to the old walnut desk in the office behind him, which is currently buried under a mound of papers.

“Not hang it on the wall?”

Stiles watches from under the brim of the too-big hat as his dad and mom look at each other, then his mom sighs loudly, but she’s doing that thing where she’s sorta trying not to smile. With that his dad plants a smacking kiss on Stiles’ cheek. “I’m gonna hang it on the wall,” he says.

“God, you two are cute,” says Stiles’ mom. “Here I brought my camera, hold the drawing up and I’ll take a picture.”

There are fifteen hundred students at Beacon Hills High School, and around three hundred and seventy-five in Stiles' year. Out of those, by the time he graduates high school, five are omegas, four are alphas, and the rest are betas, which is pretty much an accurate reflection of the ratios that exist in the wider population of the US. The ratio of alphas to omegas varies country to country, but overall it averages out about fifty-fifty globally, with betas always far more prevalent than either.

Stiles still remembers sitting in World Hist his freshman year. They were studying the consequences of World War Two. Omegas, of course, were barred from serving. Of the many American soldiers who died, though, a disproportionately large number had been alphas who, with their increased strength and enhanced stamina and senses, were more likely to serve in the countries armed forces. By the time the war ended and the casualties had been counted, there were concerns about the number of alphas left relative to omegas. How would omegas survive their heats? Who would they mate? Without enough alphas, would the rates of omegas and alphas decline nationally? A government campaign was launched to try and encourage alphas to emigrate to the US. Stiles can still see the propaganda poster from his history text book in his mind's eye: A drawing of two omegas, one male, one female, both facing away, hands on hips, while they looked back over their shoulders, each with a provocative pout, the stars and stripes emblazoned behind them. Underneath them the words read: *Your perfect omega is waiting for you!* Like all an alpha had to do was show up in the US, and a mate would be guaranteed.

Of course, since then the omega rights movement had gathered pace. That poster was viewed as a relic, an example of how bad things had been, of how much attitudes had changed. Omegas were no longer treated like trophies or possessions just expected to choose a mate, stay at home and look after kids. They were equals. They could vote, they had careers and owned homes and, with a couple of notable exceptions, could do anything else that an alpha or a beta could do.

Still, there was one assumption that never seemed to be challenged-- it was as deeply rooted in the hive mind of society now as it had ever been.

Alphas wanted omegas. Omegas wanted alphas. They belonged together.

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Stiles presents as an alpha near the end of his sophomore year, after a particularly shitty day at school. One minute he's just an ordinary sixteen year old beta, blowing off steam in the shower, trying to relieve the stress of the day. The next he's popping a knot so sensitive that the brush of his hand against it almost takes his legs out from under him.

It's kind of a shock, because his parents and grandparents are, or were, betas, but the next day, when his grandfather drags him along to speak to doctor, and alpha-omega specialist, Alan Deaton, he seems less surprised.

"Both alpha and omega genes are recessive, that's why betas are so much more prevalent. Your parents must be genetic carriers."

"Right," Stiles says. Now that he's stopped freaking out about his dick, his brain is remembering the biology lessons he sat through the first semester of his freshman year. "Jesus. Fuck--" He scrubs a hand through his hair and feels himself blush. "Sorry."

Dr. Deaton raises one eyebrow, but otherwise chooses to ignore that outburst. "I know there are several omegas at Beacon Hills High School," he says. "If you haven't already, you'll start to notice them more and more. It's possible you may even feel particularly drawn to one of them, more aware of their presence, feel a desire to nurture or protect. That's entirely natural. Their scent, in particular, is quite potent to alphas. A heightened sense of smell is one of the main ways alphas have evolved to identify--"

"Their mate. Yeah-- I remember," Stiles says. He's dimly aware his fingers are digging into his palms, and looking down at his lap he sees the skin of his knuckles stretched white.

Inclining his head, Dr. Deaton continues, “The urges of a newly presented alpha are strong, they can be overwhelming. Help is at hand though. There’s an alpha support group in town to help you learn techniques to deal with them. They’ll be able to answer any questions you have on everything from hormonal changes, right up to mating bond bites. Here--” He slides a business card across the table to Stiles, who stares down at it unseeing and doesn’t lift a hand to touch it.

“What about heats?” he asks instead. Even though he kind of knows the answer from Sex Ed-- he finds he still wants to hear it.

“Alpha heats, or ruts, as they are often called, only occur three or four times a year at most. Usually alphas experience their first within a month or so of presenting. They tend to be more manageable than those of your omega counterparts, only lasting a couple of days at most. You should be able to deal with it unassisted, however, if you wish, I can prescribe suppressants. You may want to see how you fair first though.”

Stiles hesitates for a moment, swallows, tries to breathe. “I don’t--” he stops himself. “Could I maybe take a prescription, just in case? I probably won’t fill it but--”

“Of course,” says Dr. Deaton, reaching for his pad.

Stiles inhales shakily. “Great. Thanks.”

When he leaves, his grandfather is waiting outside for him in the car. “Well?” he says.

Stiles shrugs, shows him the prescription for the suppressants and the card with the contact details for the alpha support group.

His grandfather scowls down at them. “You don’t need that garbage,” he says. He plucks them out of Stiles’ hand, scrunches them into a ball and tosses them into the back of the jeep. Then he twists the key in the ignition and the car’s engine turns over; his lips thin in the closest thing to a smile Stiles remembers seeing his entire life. “My grandson,” he says, “an alpha.”

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“This is Derek Hale.” says Ms. Ng, smiling widely at the class, who are all sitting cross-legged on the carpet in the reading corner. “His family moved to Beacon Hills from Redding last week, and I want you all to give him a warm welcome.”

The kindergarten class murmurs, “Hello, Derek,” kind of apathetically. At five and a half years old, Derek Hale is a chunky looking kid in black shorts, sneakers and a gray t-shirt which has what looks like a yogurt stain down the front. He has sticky-out ears, dark eyebrows beetling over pale eyes, and a determinedly gloomy expression.

“He’s really tall.” Scott sounds awestruck, his breath tickling the shell of Stiles’ ear, as he leans closer to whisper in it. “Like, nearly as big as Isaac’s brother, and he’s ginormous.” Camden Lahey is in first grade, not actually *that* tall, and kind of a jerk, but then, Isaac’s kind of a jerk too, so Stiles figures maybe it runs in the family.

“Everyone looks big to you,” Stiles points out, rubbing a hand furiously over his nose because it’s itchy. He squints up at Derek who immediately catches his eye and stares back. They watch each other for a long moment. Then, when Derek doesn’t look away, Stiles sticks his tongue out. At that Derek ducks his head immediately, his ears flushing red. Feeling oddly pleased, Stiles turns his attention back to Scott.

“--and besides, not everyone looks bigger,” Scott is saying. “I’m taller than Liam.”

Everyone is taller than Liam, but it seems mean to point that out. “That’s true,” Stiles says instead, and then, to be encouraging, “You’re just a late bloomer, that’s what my mom says.”

“What’s that?”

“I think it’s like when she plants flowers in the backyard, and some of them grow straight away, but some don’t grow until, like, September.”

“Huh,” Scott says thoughtfully, then, “So, your mom thinks... I’m gonna grow tall in September?” A gap-toothed smile spreads over his face.

Stiles nods vigorously. “That’s what she said.”

“Yes!” Scott performs an abortive fist pump just as Ms. Ng appears before them

“Are you listening, boys? I asked if Derek could join you, I thought maybe you could look after him on his first day.” She smiles down at them, as Derek hunches next to her like a miserable gray rain cloud.

“Sure,” Scott says immediately, scooching over from Stiles to make room on the carpet between them for Derek. Immediately Stiles closes the gap, shuffling his butt closer to Scott, because he and Scott always sit together, and there’s no way that’s changing now, no sir. He scowls up at Derek who isn’t even watching them, just staring sullenly at his sneakers.

“There, look, they’ve made room for you,” Ms. Ng says, “Take a seat, sweetheart.”

Derek lowers himself into the space Stiles vacated stiffly, reluctantly, like he thinks if he sits down someone’s gonna force feed him broccoli or worse, sprouts.

“I’m Scott,” Scott says, leaning across Stiles and offering Derek a bright smile. “You used to live in Redding? That’s so cool! My abuela lives there.”

Derek nods slightly. He’s hugging his knees to his chest, and still not looking at them.

There’s an awkward silence and Scott nudges Stiles with his elbow. “Go

on,” he mouths.

Stiles shrugs, watching Derek out the corner of his eye. He’s so weird, with his scowl, and the way his hair sticks up in a cowlick at the back. He’s wearing Batman sneakers and this close he smells of Dove soap, just like they use at home; there’s a funny, squirming feeling in Stiles’ tummy that he doesn’t really understand, a prickling under his skin. Edging pointedly away from Derek, he presses into Scott’s familiar warmth a bit more.

“This is Stiles,” Scott says, when Stiles doesn’t introduce himself. “We’re best friends.”

“Okay.” Derek shrugs jerkily. His fingers tighten their grip on his knees, eyes still fixed downwards.

It’s annoying, Stiles thinks, the way he won’t look at them. So he says, “Derek’s kind of a weird name.”

At that Derek’s frown deepens, mouth turning down in a sour pout. “Not as weird as Stiles.”

Something rises up in Stiles chest at that, something sharp and irritated. This kid. This annoying kid who’s come into his classroom, intruding onto his friendship with Scott, screwing everything up with his soap and his eyebrows. This stupid kid who won’t *look* at him. Well, Stiles will fix that. Stiles will *make* him look. Puffing his chest out he leans across and hisses, “Yeah, well, Batman sucks.”

“Guys.” Scott’s fingers plucking anxiously at the hem of his t-shirt, but it’s too late-- Derek finally meets Stiles’ gaze, eyes narrowing dangerously.

“You suck,” he says, and Stiles’ mouth drops open in a stunned little gasp.

“Guys,” Scott says again, pleading. “We could go do some drawing. Stiles is really good at art. He drew a picture of a horse last week and it was awesome. Ms. Ng says it was the best she’s ever seen.”

That's true and Stiles is good at art, he's always been good at it. It's definitely his favorite thing. At Scott's words though, Derek's eyes narrow and his jaw tightens mutinously; he shakes his head.

"Well--uh--Why don't we go play with legos? Everyone likes legos. Me and Stiles were building a castle yesterday, and--"

It goes like that for the rest of the day: Scott plays peacemaker while Stiles needles Derek, and Derek by turns ignores him or snipes back viciously.

"You don't like him?" Scott whispers to Stiles when they're laying on the mat next to each other at naptime.

"He said I sucked!"

"You said his name was weird."

"He said *my* name was weird."

Scott bites down on his lip and doesn't say anything, but Stiles can tell he's disappointed. This is all Derek's fault, he thinks to himself as he turns onto his side away from Scott, before Derek came along everything was perfect.

-

When Stiles is eight years old his dad dies. His car gets t-boned at an intersection on his way back from the grocery store to pick up juice and popcorn. One minute Stiles is snuggled up on the couch at home with his mom watching cartoons and waiting for his dad to get back with the snacks so they can watch Star Wars together. The next there's a knock at the door, and then-- well-- Stiles' life is never the same again.

His dad's dad, Elias, is a former soldier and retired Sheriff of a small town in Kentucky; he moves into their guest bedroom shortly before the funeral

to help out, and then never leaves. Stiles' dad died off duty, so there are no death benefits from the state, and Stiles' mom picks up extra shifts at the 24hr Walgreens to try and make ends meet. That means his grandfather ends up preparing Stiles' breakfast most days, then walking him to school. He picks him up afterwards, as well. Most evenings he cooks too, so that Stiles' mom can work late. Before Stiles' dad died there used to be tacos on Tuesday, chicken parmesan on Wednesday and, on Friday's, mac and cheese with little hot dogs cut up in it. His grandfather is a guy with simpler tastes and limited cooking ability though, which means now, most nights, Stiles eats rubbery meat, runny mashed potato and canned vegetables.

Elias doesn't talk a whole lot, and he smokes Camel cigarettes like they're going out of style. He makes sure Stiles does his homework in the evenings, serves dinner, and then switches the TV on. He turns the volume up until it's blaring, lights a cigarette, and watches the news, scowling and muttering to himself, while blue smoke curls out of his nose and hangs heavily in the air around them.

The first time he catches Stiles crying after his dad dies, he stands in the doorway to his bedroom, face half turned away in shadow, mouth all pulled down and disapproving. "Breakfast'll be ready in ten," he says, voice devoid of all emotion. "Clean up."

That's how it goes now: Smarten up. Stand straight. Stop fidgeting. Don't complain. Don't cry. You gotta be the *man* of the house now, understand? Be a brave boy. Isn't that what your dad would have wanted?

Stiles doesn't know what his dad would have wanted, other than not being dead, of course.

-

It doesn't work out the way Dr. Deaton says it will, and Stiles doesn't

understand why. Sure, he knows who the omegas at school are, he knew that before he ever presented, the only thing that seems to have really changed is that they smell stronger. Nowadays he can tell when one of them is due to go into heat. He experiences his own first heat too, battling through it without the aid of suppressants. That all consuming desire to protect and provide for an omega never really hits, though. If anything he finds their scent too sweet, almost sickly.

“You just haven’t met the right one,” Scott says confidently as they’re strapping their pads on before lacrosse, a couple of months after Stiles first presents. “It’ll happen.”

Stiles scrunches his face up in a frown. “I guess--” At that moment the door to the locker room swings open and Derek fucking Hale strides in, permanent scowl in place, stupid hair gelled up in that annoying way that Stiles hates. As Derek walks toward his locker, he’s already stripping off his t-shirt, and, even from way across the room, Stiles can smell the Axe body spray clinging to his skin, the goddamn Dove soap he always seems to use, and, under that, a rich, musky scent that’s distinctly him. He scowls at the broad sweep of Derek’s back and his voice dies in his throat.

“Derek presented as an Alpha last week,” Scott whispers. “Isaac said it happened after the party at Erica Reyes house. You know? The one where you two argued about--”

“I know,” Stiles snaps irritably.

“I was thinking,” Scott presses on, “maybe that explains why you guys never-- y’know-- clicked? Two alphas.” He knocks his fists together significantly.

Stiles raises one eyebrow. “Nah,” he says, after a moment’s consideration. “It’s nothing to do with that. After all, I get along with Danny.” Mahealani presented as an alpha a year ago, and Stiles and he have never so much as exchanged a cross word with each other.

“That doesn’t count,” Scott huffs, “Everyone gets along with Danny. Hey,

did I tell you that Kira agreed to go with me to the pep rally? I wonder if--”

Across from them, Derek slams his locker shut and turns to face them pulling his lacrosse jersey down over his head, but not before Stiles gets a glimpse of abs, and the beginnings of a dark trail of hair dipping under the waistband of his shorts.

He looks away, quickly.

-

“That blue marker pen belongs to our table,” Stiles says, with all the righteous anger a third grader can muster. “We’re missing our one. I need it and your table has *two* .”

Stiles hovers vengefully, fists clenched, as Derek blinks up at him from his seat. “I’m using it,” he says eventually.

“That one belongs to your table,” Stiles says, pointing at the one Kira is currently using to color in her picture of a dragon. “When Kira’s finished using it, she’ll share it with you . ” He makes a grab for the pen, but Derek whips it out of reach.

“No! You can have it when I’m finished,” Derek says.

“That’s not fair! It’s ours!” Stiles’ voice is steadily getting louder.

“You can have mi--” Kira starts to say, but Stiles dismisses her with a wave of his hand and she trails off into silence.

“That blue pen is ours,” Stiles says. “You selfish jerkface-- give it to me!”

“I’m not a jerkface,” Derek says, finally rising to the bait. “And you can’t come to this table and boss me around--”

“I’m not--”

“--And call me names.”

“I didn’t--”

“You called me a jerkface.”

“That’s not a name. That’s just the truth.”

Derek’s eyes narrow, and he blows out a sigh. He has this look on his stupid face, like he thinks he’s so much better than Stiles, like he’s so much *older*, even though there’s only two months between them. “Look, just because your dad di--” Derek doesn’t get to finish the sentence; something in Stiles shatters into a million pieces.

“Shut up! Shut up! You shut up,” Stiles yells, launching himself at Derek in blind fury; Derek’s chair tips backwards clattering to the floor, and both boys go tumbling with it.

Stiles is dimly aware of someone shouting, “Fight!” But he doesn’t know who because he’s too busy trying to hit as hard as he can, his fists balled so tight he can feel the half moons of his fingernails digging into his palm; Derek has one hand pressed against Stiles’ jaw trying to push him away, even as he kicks Stiles repeatedly in the shin.

Moments later Mrs. Crews separates them and sends them to see the principal in disgrace. It isn’t the first time Derek and Stiles have ended up in his office together. Over the last couple of years their constant bickering and sniping has proved a challenge for most of the staff. Since kindergarten their teachers have tried to keep them separated in class wherever possible, not that it seems to work. Somehow they can’t help seeking each other out; they pick at each other like scabs, and never let the wounds heal. This is the first time it’s escalated to an all out fist fight though, and Mr. Bell, the principal, is stern and disappointed; after giving them both a long lecture he calls home to speak to their parents. A half hour later Derek and Stiles are sitting on the plastic chairs outside his office in stony silence while Derek’s

mom and Stiles' grandfather talk to Mr. Bell.

Stiles spends his time straining to listen, picking out words like 'angry', and 'troubled', and 'trying time'. His stomach sinks. He doesn't know how he got here. It feels like he's falling and there's no one to catch him. There's a hollow, empty feeling in his chest ever since his dad died, like he just can't feel things right anymore, and he doesn't know how to fix it. Tears prick his eyes and a lump burns hot in his throat, but he won't let himself cry. Not in front of Derek, and certainly not when his grandfather could be out at any moment.

"I'm sorry--" Derek says, clearing his throat awkwardly. "For what I said--"

"I hate you," Stiles whispers fiercely, rounding on him. "Never speak to me again, okay? Never."

"Well, I hope you gave as good as you got, kid," is all his grandfather says later, when he's walking Stiles to the car.

And that's that.

They drive home. Stiles does his homework. Forces down dry meatloaf, and water-logged green beans. Goes to bed. Lays there in the quiet dark of his room and refuses to let himself cry. Neither of them mentions the incident to his mom, and his grandfather never brings it up again.

The next day when Stiles opens his drawer at school he finds one lone blue marker pen lying on top of his books. He stares down at it for a long moment, that weird, hollow feeling in his chest feels like it's getting bigger, like it wants to swallow him up from the inside out.

He slams the drawer shut.

Stiles has always struggled to sleep, but when his dad dies it gets worse and by the time he reaches his freshman year at high school he's an inveterate night owl. There are nights where his mom gets back from work at two in the morning, and Stiles is still awake, hunched over his laptop trying to finish a last minute essay for English, or, more likely, sprawled on his bed, sketching. He still loves to draw as much, if not more, than he ever did, it's one of the few things he has left that makes him happy. He has a couple of sketch pads that he keeps hidden away in his school bag where his grandfather won't see them. Instinctively he knows he doesn't want to hear his grandfather's opinions about art. Late at night though, when his grandfather is already in bed, Stiles will get his pad out and practice. He works in pencils mainly, because they don't make much mess and they're easy to hide in plain sight-- innocuous, if his grandfather stumbles across them.

Those nights when his mom arrives home from working the swing shift plus whatever overtime she's managed to pick up, she knocks gently on his door. "Pączuszk, why are you still awake?" she always says, voice mildly reproachful, and Stiles always closes his laptop, or jams his sketchpad under his pillow and grins sheepishly, kisses her goodnight and then clambers into bed and turns the light out.

Late one night, not long before Christmas his freshman year, she knocks softly on his door, then opens it; she's holding a tray with two cups of cocoa balanced on it and she's still in her work clothes. "Homework?" she says nodding at the sketchpad Stiles is jamming hastily into his school bag.

"Something like that," Stiles says.

She sucks in a breath through her teeth. "I wish you'd inherited your dad's time management skills. You're too much like me. Leaving everything to the last minute." She places the tray on his desk, then picks up the cups, one in each hand and walks to the bed, says, "You mind if I sit?"

"No, of course not," Stiles scrambles over in his bed, so he's sitting on his pillow, back resting against the headboard, his feet snug under the covers. She hands him a mug, then sits down in the middle of the bed, the mattress

sinking a little under her wait; she holds her own cup carefully so as not to spill any. The soft yellow light of his bedside lamp illuminates the room and she takes a sip from her drink, then sighs. Stiles cradles the cup she gave him between his palms and lets the warmth seep into his fingers. For a while the slow sips they take are the only sound in the silence that falls between them.

“School okay?” she says eventually.

“S’fine.” Stiles always says it’s fine whenever she asks, even when it isn’t. Especially when it isn’t. He always finds something good to tell her. It’s been years since his dad passed, but the worry lines on his mom’s face are getting deeper every year and she always looks so tired now. Tired and paper thin. So he searches for the good news, the silver lining. Normally he says, “I made the honor roll,” or, “Coach says I’m gonna make first string lacrosse one day,” or, “I got an A on that Chem paper I did last week.” And none of it’s a lie. It’s just...not the whole truth.

Tonight though, he doesn’t say any of those things. They never talk about his dad much, but it would have been his birthday today.

“Fine?” His mom looks at him over the brim of her cup, and for once, under the scrutiny of her tired brown eyes he can’t cobble together a half truth. It isn’t in him.

“I miss dad.” He doesn’t mean to say it. It just sort of-- falls out of him.

Her smile goes a little tight, eyes sad; she sucks in a breath. “Me too,” she says on the exhale, shoulders falling. She looks lost, lonely sitting there. Small somehow.

He places his mug on his bedside table and crawls forward on his knees, leans his head into the crook of her shoulder. She reaches up a hand and scratches idly at his scalp. Eventually she says thickly, “He would be so proud of you.”

Stiles scrunches his eyes shut. “He’d be proud of you too,” he says, forcing

his voice steady, and she makes a tiny broken off sound in the quiet of the room, her shoulders shake slightly.

After a long moment she rubs her hand across her face, then drains the rest of her cocoa, placing her empty mug next to Stiles' one on the bedside table. "It is time for bed, I think. Come on." She shoos him back under the covers and fusses him, tucking him in tight just like she used to, before. Then leans down and kisses him.

"Goodnight." She runs her fingers through his hair one last time then goes to stand.

"Mom, I--"

She pauses, looks back, eyes red rimmed, cheeks tear-streaked and glistening. "You want me to stay a little longer," she asks. He nods, and she sinks back down again. Reaching out he takes one of her hands and places it where he wants it, and she takes the hint and starts running her fingers slowly through his hair again-- slow and rhythmic.

Almost like an afterthought, she starts to sing in a low voice:

"Ach, śpij, kochanie,

jesli gwiazdke z nieba chcesz - dostaniesz.

Wszystkie dzieci, nawet źle,

pograżone są we śnie,

a ty jedna tylko nie."

It's exactly what he wanted, what he *needed*, but Stiles still rolls his eyes a little even as they start to drift shut. Mutters, "Mo-om, I'm not a little kid any more," in half-hearted protest.

His mom snorts softly, says, “Mieczyslaw, fifteen is still a kid, trust me.” She scratches his scalp a little. “In the morning,” she says, voice barely a whisper, “we’ll go visit your dad. Together. Just the two of us.”

Stiles turns his head, burying his face in his pillow, and scrunches his eyes tight shut.

-

They move in different circles. Derek has his own friends: Isaac and Kira. Stiles pretty much just sticks with Scott. After the blue marker pen incident Stiles refuses to speak to Derek, and Derek seems ready to ignore Stiles right back. Well, not ignore exactly. They rarely speak to each other, but that doesn’t mean Stiles isn’t aware of him. In the years that follow, sometimes it feels like Derek is all he’s aware of: the sullen tilt of his mouth, the way his thick eyebrows bunch when he scowls, the crazy what-the-hell-is-that-called color of his eyes. Stiles would feel weird about it, except that Derek seems just as hyper aware of him. Stiles catches him sometimes, watching quietly. His eyes fixed on Stiles’ hands, or face, expression creased in a frown, like he’s found fault with something there, or maybe like he’s trying to solve a puzzle. They don’t talk though, except to snipe and bicker, and everyone *knows* they hate each other. So there’s no reason for them to have anything to do with each other, at least, not until Scott develops a crush on Kira in their freshman year of high school.

“Her hair is so shiny,” he says to Stiles, over juice boxes in the school cafeteria, all wide eyed with wonder. “Don’t you think so?”

Stiles glances over at the table where she’s sitting with Isaac and Derek, and sighs. “Yeah,” he admits. “Very shiny.”

“It’s her birthday next month. I heard her tell Erica . There’s gonna be a party. You think we’ll get invited?”

“I don’t--”

“Should I send her a card anyway?”

“Uhhhh--”

“Did you know she does martial arts? She has a black belt in aikido and a red belt in karate.”

“That’s really cool--”

“Yeah.” Scott rests his elbows on the table and plants his chin in his hands, staring at her dreamily. “I bet she could kick my ass.”

“You should write that in the card,” Stiles snorts, and Scott elbows him, hard.

To Stiles, at least, it seems unlikely that anything will come of it. Scott may have a teensy crush, but he and Kira barely speak, probably in part because their best friends despise each other. The lines in the sand were drawn years ago, so there’s no reason to suppose that Scott will actually get the chance to act on his feelings. Against all odds though, they both get an invite to Kira’s birthday party along with half their freshman year.

“We have to go!” Scott says, on the morning they receive the invitations. He clutches Stiles’ shirt. “You have to go with me. Please. Please!”

“I don’t know, dude--” Derek’s almost certainly gonna be there and that thought is enough to make Stiles’ stomach squirm.

“I’ll let you pick which character you want first on Mario Kart for a month,” Scott pleads. It’s game night every Friday and they both love Yoshi, so this is big. Real big.

“Two.”

Scott swallows, looking pained. “Six weeks.”

“Hmmm.” Stiles’ eyes narrow. “Okay.”

“Yes!” Scott fist pumps. “Oh my god. What am I going to wear? Should I get my hair cut? What kind of gift am I gonna--”

“Two months,” Stiles says. “Two months or I refuse, because nothing is worth this.”

“Fine,” Scott says. “But you have to come to the mall with me and help me pick a gift, okay?”

“Oh god,” Stiles moans, massaging his temple with his fingers. “I’m too young to have this many regrets.”

Scott grins.

Stiles wakes on the day of the actual party, his stomach in knots, and he can’t work out why. The guests are all people he knows. Sure, they’re not *friend* friends, but he doesn’t actively dislike anyone except Derek, so as long as they avoid each other it should be fine. After dinner he gets dressed reluctantly in his nicest jeans and his favorite Iron Man tee, and spends a little bit of time on his hair, while anxiety burns a hole in his stomach.

“You look nice,” his mom says as he comes down the stairs.

“Thanks.” He scowls a little as she fusses with his hair.

“No alcohol. Or drugs.”

“I don’t think it’s that kind of party. Besides, I’m pretty sure Kira’s family are gonna be there to keep an eye on us all. ”

“MmmmHmmm. Do we need to have the safe sex talk again?”

“Please no. I’m a fifteen year old beta who’s never been kissed, or had a relationship of any kind. I don’t think that’s on the cards tonight.”

She pulls him in for a hug. “You look very handsome,” she whispers in his

ear.

“Mo-om,” he says, blushing.

Scott’s mom picks Stiles up and drops them both off together. Kira’s parents have hired a community center and a DJ, and as they stand awkwardly outside the place, and watch Scott’s mom drive away, they can already hear the bass booming and the sound of laughter coming from within.

“Oh my god,” Scott says, clutching a small box in wrapped in silver paper to his chest. “I think I’m gonna be sick. What if she doesn’t like it? What if it’s the wrong size.”

“It’s a necklace. Do they... come in sizes?” Stiles doesn’t think so, but he can’t claim to be an expert. The heart pendant had looked okay to him when Scott had dragged him round the mall last weekend.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe I thought it would be a good idea to buy jewellery. I spent all my money on it and it’s stupid and she’s going to hate it. What kind of a friend are you? How could you let me do this?”

“Hey,” Stiles says patting him on the shoulder. “Breathe. And remember. You didn’t just spend all your money-- you gave up the rights to Yoshi for two whole months.”

Scott glares at him. “Not helping.”

Stiles grins. “It’s gonna be fine. I mean, not the Mario Kart thing, I’m gonna own your ass, and it’s gonna be awesome, but the Kira thing. She’s a nice person, Scotty. Even if she doesn’t feel the same way, she isn’t, like, gonna crush you or anything.”

“She is nice,” Scott says, swallowing. He looks faintly green. “Yeah, you’re right. She’s a nice person. I’m a nice person. We’re both nice.” He jams the delicately wrapped gift in the pocket of his jeans so he can wipe his sweaty palms on his thighs. “Nice.”

“Exactly.”

Scott fans his face with his hands. “Okay. Well. This was a good chat. Reassuring. I’m just gonna--” he jerks a thumb behind him. “--go take a quick walk around the block a few times, throw up in an alley, and then we can come back and go to the party. Or maybe just call my mom? And ask her to come pick us up?” He wheels round, fully intending to leave.

“Scott--” Stiles reaches out and catches him by the arm, spinning him back round. “Come on. If I can go in there and spend three hours with my worst enemy, then you can definitely go in there and give the girl you like the pretty jewellery you bought for her.”

With a sigh, Scott’s shoulders sag. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” It isn’t like Stiles wants to go in either, but he knows for a fact that if Scott chickens out now he’ll feel sick about it for weeks, and he can’t let that happen. So he wraps an arm around Scott’s shoulder and guides him up the path to the community center.

“Is that really how you think of him?” Scott says, as they reach the door.

“Who?”

“Derek. You think he’s your worst enemy?”

Stiles shrugs, because enemy isn’t the right word, but what is? How should he describe the person who’s been a splinter under his skin since he was five years old. “You can’t get along with everyone. I mean, *you* can, but most people can’t.”

Kira greets them both with smiles and hugs, and from the look on Scott’s face that alone makes coming to the party worthwhile. A second later more guests arrive and she slips away to go greet them. That leaves Scott and Stiles to find the table set up for cards and gifts, and then take a look around them. The room is festooned with balloons and streamers and already half filled with freshmen, some of whom are dancing, but many of whom are

lining the walls and looking shy.

Stiles spots Derek almost immediately. He's standing by the food table at the back of the room, wearing the same old jeans he always wears to school, and a plain black t-shirt. He looks across at Stiles immediately, like the weight of Stiles' gaze is a physical thing. For a beat, maybe two, they stare at each other, then Stiles rolls his eyes and looks away.

"You should go and say something," Scott says, nudging him with his elbow.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Chit chat. Make friends. It's been years since you actually spoke. I bet you have more in common than you think."

Stiles huffs. "Yeah. We're both humans. Two arms. Two legs."

"No. I mean--"

"You just want me to play nice with him because he's Kira's best friend," Stiles says shrewdly.

"No--" Scott flushes, and ducks his head. "Maybe? I don't get why you two can't get along. It's like you want to be offended by each other."

"Or, it's like he's an asshole. Look. We're never gonna get along, but I'm not going to ruin your night, okay? Me and Derek will avoid each other. That's all. Now, go and ask Kira if she wants to dance."

"Really? You think?"

"Yeah, I do. Make your move, man. Or at least go over and try and talk to her."

"But--"

"Faint heart never won fair lady," Stiles says, and shoves him in Kira's

direction. Scott stumbles over to her, shooting one last nervous look at Stiles. Within moments, though, they're talking avidly, and Stiles knows from the look on Scott's face that he's been forgotten.

It's okay. He doesn't mind, exactly. It suits him to be just here, on the edge of the party. Watching rather than participating. He slinks along the wall, finds a little nook by a window and leans up against it, hands jammed in his pocket, toe tapping idly to the beat of the music. His eyes roam the dancefloor, before finally settling on Derek again. He's standing on the opposite side of the room, now, solo cup in hand, sipping from it awkwardly. His hair is gelled up differently today, like he's styled it specially for the party. Stiles isn't sure he likes it, isn't sure he likes that much product in anyone's hair at the best of times. It makes it look stiff and unnatural. It'd probably be hard to the touch.

Derek glances over at him, and their eyes meet once again. The strobing lights of the party in the dark room make Derek's skin look paler somehow, and he always wears such dark colors too, greys and blacks, it's like he's never heard of--

"Hey! Hey, Stilinski!"

Stiles blinks. Caitlin is standing in front of him, they have Bio together every other Friday. "Hey," he says. "Hi."

"You wanna dance?"

"Uh--" Like a reflex he glances to where Derek was standing. He isn't there anymore, and suddenly Stiles feels adrift, uncertain. "Sure."

He kind of gets sucked into the party after that and it passes in a blur of dancing, eating vast quantities of food, and drinking too much soda. Toward the end of the evening they cut a huge birthday cake and sing Happy Birthday, and then someone pulls on a rope or does something, because balloons all cascade down from the ceiling. As they fall people start charging about, batting them into the air and at each other. It's fun. It's really fun.

Or it is, until right near the end, when the DJ puts on a slow number, and then it all goes to shit.

Scott has finally plucked up the courage to ask Kira for a dance and she's said yes. They're holding each other with enough room for Jesus. Scott's blushing furiously as he clumps about the floor, he seems to be counting under his breath. Kira doesn't seem to mind though, she's smiling sweetly at him. Stiles feels kinda happy in spite of himself. Feels his little grinchy heart swell a couple of sizes at the sight of them. He takes a sip of coke from his solo cup and smiles to himself, eyes darting around the room. A few people are pairing off now, kind of awkwardly, but it's happening. Isaac and Danny are swaying out of time to the music together, Erica and Braeden are laughing as they fake a dramatic tango that's completely at odds with the music, but there are more too, gradually filling the dance floor. It's kind of weird, but it's okay, he doesn't feel left out, because there are still plenty of people who aren't-- plenty of people who--

He spots Derek. He's just a few feet away, swaying slowly, his arms resting lightly on someone's waist. As a pink neon light flits over them, Stiles catches the girl in profile: dark hair and a wide smile: Jennifer Blake. She's new, just moved to the area. He knows her from school. She's-- she's really pretty.

Stiles swallows.

It feels like all the air has been sucked out of the room.

As he watches, the song slows even further, drawing to a close, and he sees Jennifer hesitate, then lean up for a kiss, one hand curled around the back of Derek's neck.

Their lips meet.

And just like that, Stiles can't breathe, can't rip his eyes away from the sight, something jagged and awful twisting in his chest. Then, like he can feel it too, Derek's eyes fly open and his gaze immediately meets Stiles' across the crowded room, his lips still locked with Jennifer's. It goes on.

Stiles feels every moment like it's an hour even though it's probably only seconds. Seconds, where they stare at each other as Derek kisses someone else. Seconds in which he feels like the bottom has dropped out of his world. He feels dizzy, almost faint, for no goddamn reason. His legs are about to give way, and he reaches out and clutches the wall for support.

The music fades out. The couples separate. Jennifer steps back, Derek's looking down at her now, and she reaches up, brushing her fingers against his cheek. She says something, and Derek smiles at her.

Stomach churning, Stiles turns on his heel. Runs. Crashes through the door to the men's room and sits in a bathroom stall with his head in his hands.

He should never have come to this stupid fucking party. It's too loud. Too much noise. He's eaten something that's disagreed with him.

God.

He feels like he's gonna be sick.

-

Stiles is out with his mom at a grocery store on the edge of town, near Beacon Heights. It isn't their usual one, but this one has a good deal on something or other. Stiles can't remember what exactly, he hasn't been paying attention. He's twelve and he's bored, staring into the middle distance with a glazed expression.

"I don't know--" his mom mutters, half opening a door and then shutting it again.

Stiles opens his mouth to reply, but nothing comes out. Disappearing down the aisle next to them he sees Derek there with his own family. At least, Stiles is pretty sure they're his family. Alongside Derek are two girls, and

an older woman who wears her copper color hair in loose curls. She must be their mom, although she doesn't look much like any of the three kids. Stiles spies on them as they look at cereal. He can hear one of them, the younger of the two girls, who has the same dark hair and sullen pout as Derek, complaining that they're not buying more Applejacks.

Stiles parks his cart at the end of the aisle while his mom browses through a refrigerator looking for frozen pizza, and observes them quietly.

"But I want Applejacks!" The smaller of the two girls says plaintively. "We had Applejacks the other week, and I want them again!"

"Don't be an asshole, Cor," snaps Laura. Stiles recognizes Laura easily enough. She's about two years older than he and Derek, and was at the same middle school as them, before she graduated last year, and started high school.

"But--"

Derek's mom sighs. "Honey, the coupons this week are for--shoot, what are they for?" She opens her purse and rifles through it, producing a thick wedge of coupons. "Frosted Mini-Wheats."

"But I don't like Mini-Wheats," Cora hisses. "I want--"

"The frosted ones are cool," Derek says, wrapping an arm round her shoulder. "Seriously, they taste better than Applejacks."

"I don't believe you." She scowls up at him.

He grins down at her benignly and ruffles her hair. And Stiles has never seen him smile like that before. Small. Genuine. It changes his whole face. "You should believe me," Derek says, picking up the box from the shelf and showing it to her. "Look. What do you see?"

"They look disgusting. Like the sort of thing a horse would eat."

"Not the cereal bit. The bit on top?"

“That looks like snow?”

“It doesn’t just look like snow. It is snow.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m serious. They-- They have a weather machine in the factory.”

“There’s no such thing.”

“If Willy Wonka can have a boat made out of a boiled sweet in his chocolate factory, then why can’t a cereal factory have a weather machine? I’m telling you, they press a big button and it sucks all the moisture out of the air and then--”

“Then?”

“It starts to snow, inside. Real actual snow. It lands on the cereal.”

“It would melt! The cereal would get all mushy.”

“Nuh-uh. Because it’s magical snow. That’s what makes it so special.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why do you think they’re called frosted wheats? It’s right there in the name.” He taps the name to prove his point.

Cora glares up at him. “Oh my *god*. I’m not five anymore, Der. I don’t believe in magic. Willy Wonka is a character in a *book*. And--” She jabs a finger at the picture on the box. “--That’s sugar.”

“Not sugar,” Derek mouths at her. “Magical snow!”

She rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling. “You’re so full of cr--”

“Cora Hale!”

“Sorry, Mama.”

Derek places the box in the shopping cart, and Cora elbows him in the side. They tussle gently with each other as they continue on down the aisle, away from Stiles.

His own mom appears beside him a moment later carrying a frozen pizza, and offers him a tired smile. “Does your grandfather like pepperoni? I can’t remember.”

“No,” Stiles says, with a sigh. “He doesn’t like pizza at all.”

“Damn!” her shoulders sag. “Well, maybe he can have the leftovers from yesterday, and we’ll have this tonight. You know, as a treat? Whaddya say? I’ll make some salad too. All fresh.” She knocks her elbow against him.

Stiles can’t remember the last time he had pizza, but it was probably at Scott’s house. He leans into his mom gratefully, resting his head on her shoulder. “Sounds good, ma.”

She places the pizza in the cart and wraps an arm around him hesitantly, like she isn’t sure whether he’ll welcome open affection in public. He hugs her back, breathes her in.

“You okay, mój pączusku ?” she says.

“Yeah,” he says, voice scratchy, muffled by her shoulder. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Truthfully, though, his chest feels taut, like he can’t take a full breath, and there’s a big anxious knot in his stomach that just seems to keep pulling tighter and tighter. But he can’t remember not feeling this way, so maybe that’s just normal.

-

Sometimes he dreams about his dad. Dreams him sitting in that one

armchair he always used to use, or stepping through the door safely home from work. Dreams the way his eyes used to crinkle at the corner when he smiled, the timbre of his voice. Dreams about the way he used to wrap his arms so tight around Stiles, and make him feel warm and safe, invincible.

He can't dream the smell of him though. Cedar and sage. That's what's missing. That's why, even when Stiles jerks awake in the middle of the night pillow damp, gasping for air, he's never fooled. He knows on some level that it's been a dream.

It's always gonna be a dream from now on.

-

Stiles presents as an alpha in his sophomore year, a couple months after he turns sixteen. It's been cold and drizzly and Stiles is pissed before he even gets to JV lacrosse practice that evening. Just that morning his grandfather had been through his room and discovered some of his sketches and all hell had broken loose.

"I thought we agreed you weren't taking that art class," he'd said, dumping a loose sheaf of papers on the kitchen table where Stiles was eating his breakfast.

Right at the beginning of his sophomore year, Stiles had tried to sign up for an elective art class and his grandfather had refused to sign off on it, saying, "There's no future in it, kid. It's a waste of time. You got brains. You could be a lawyer. Or go into law enforcement. Real work, like me and your dad did. Hell, a spell in the military wouldn't be a bad idea, it'd give you focus and discipline."

There had been no arguing with him, he was a force of nature, and neither Stiles nor his mom had worked out how to stand against him once he got an

idea in his head. So Stiles took all the classes his grandfather approved of, and then forged his signature and signed up for the art class without telling him. It was extra work, but worth it. He'd managed to make it most of his sophomore year with his grandfather none the wiser. Even more frustrating, the drawings his grandfather found this morning weren't even from the class.

"I'm not taking the class," Stiles had lied furiously. "These are just sketches. It's my hobby. It's--"

"It's a waste of your goddamn time. You should be concentrating on lacrosse and your studies, how are you gonna get a sports scholarship if you're drawing--" he'd glared down at the sketches. "Some guy's face? His hands? Who is this?"

"No one." Stiles had blushed hotly. "I'm just practicing the human form." He'd gathered the papers up and clutched them to his chest.

"Practice your lacrosse," his grandfather had said, eyes narrowing. "That's what matters."

Although, in the end, he'd seemed to believe that Stiles wasn't taking the class, the whole debacle made Stiles late for school. To make things worse, when he arrived he found Scott was off sick with a stomach bug, so he couldn't even vent to anyone. In second period Harris had been on his back in Chem, like always. Then to crown it all there'd been a pop quiz in History and Stiles hadn't prepared.

So when he storms into the locker room at the end of the day spoiling for a fight, and crashes straight into the solid bulk of Derek fucking Hale, it feels like the cherry on top of a pretty shitty cake.

"Watch it, Stilinski," Derek snaps, shoving him a little with his shoulder.

"You watch it," Stiles snarls, starting forward.

"Now, boys," says Coach Finstock, appearing from behind a row of lockers,

as if by magic. “I like that aggression, it’s good, but save it for the field, okay?”

With a baleful glare at Derek, Stiles disappears off to change, muttering to himself.

On the field though, Stiles can’t help himself. It’s as if Derek’s a hot needle in his brain, there’s this burning awareness of his presence-- this desire to poke and prod and make him pay attention.

He jostles Derek as they’re warming up, then, when they’re doing drills later, coach pairs them together, and Derek aims the ball right at Stiles’ head. Sure, Stiles catches it easily enough, but the smug smirk on Derek’s face lets him know it wasn’t an accident, and Stiles rolls his shoulders, gritting his teeth. It goes on like that, back and forth, back and forth, pushing, pushing, always pushing. Derek trips Stiles, Stiles elbows him. Stiles body checks him, Derek ‘accidentally’ stamps on his foot.

They’re the two best JV players by a mile, both a shoo-in for varsity next year, and Coach Finstock knows it. Unlike the other teachers who try to keep them separate, Coach likes to push their rivalry with each other. It’s a delicate balance to keep: letting them try to outdo each other without ever allowing them to lose sight of the fact that they’re on the same team. Mostly he succeeds. Today though, as the evening rain drizzles down on them, and the scent of damp grass and sweat fills the air, there’s something simmering under Stiles’ skin, a restless energy he can’t rein in. The more Derek comes for him, the more he wants him to, wants to reach out and grab hold of him and--

When it happens, it’s a foul. He knows it. Derek knows it. Everyone knows it. A body check is one thing, but somehow during the scrimmage, Stiles tackles Derek so hard it knocks him clean off his feet and Stiles lands on top of him. The ball bounces out the pocket of Derek’s lacrosse stick and rolls out of reach.

They lie there, Derek sprawled on his back and Stiles spread out on top of him, both panting heavily. Stiles is horribly aware of the way Derek’s chest

heaves, the feel of all that firm muscle pressed up against him; leaning up on one hand Stiles stares down, meeting Derek's gaze. The sweet smell of wet grass is in the air, but this close it's a background note to another, more familiar scent: Dove soap, Axe, and under that something rich and musky. It makes Stiles' stomach twist. He can hear the soft pitter patter of rain as it drums against his helmet, can almost see their breath mingling on each exhale. Eyes still locked, Stiles wets his lips with his tongue, and Derek's gaze drops immediately to follow the motion.

"Come on," Coach calls, clapping his hands together. "Is this a scrimmage or are you trying to get second base, Stilinski?"

Swearing under his breath, Stiles rolls off Derek immediately and gets to his feet. For maybe the first time ever, he and Derek ignore each other for the rest of the practice.

Later that night, at home, jerking off in the shower, he pops his first knot and then quietly kneels against the tiled floor and has a panic attack straight after.

It's not so weird, he tells himself later as he lies in bed with a tight, anxious feeling in his stomach. Sure, in all the stories ever read, movies he's watched, hell, in every lesson he's ever sat through, alphas present because of an omega-- but it can't be that weird to present jacking off thinking about the scent of a beta, even one you kinda hate. After all, two hours ago, as far as Stiles knew *he* was a beta too. So it isn't like he did anything... wrong.

It is kinda weird though, he knows it is, and two months later, when Derek presents as an alpha too, that tight, anxious feeling in his gut just gets worse and worse.

“--the Supreme Court’s ruling means omegas can now serve in all areas of our armed forces,” says the newsreader on the TV, and the screen cuts to footage of jubilant omega rights activists celebrating in the streets.

“Pfff,” his grandfather huffs. “Ridiculous. Omegas.”

Stiles looks up from where he’s sitting at the kitchen table, math book open in front of him. Junior year is kicking his ass, and he had a heat last week so he’s playing catch up. His mom is puttering around the kitchen cleaning up after dinner, and doesn’t seem to be listening.

“Don’t get me wrong,” his grandfather says, “I’ve got nothing against omegas. They’re fine, in their place--”

Stiles sucks in a breath, opens his mouth. “I don’t--”

His grandfather rolls his eyes and blows out a stream of blue smoke. “Don’t get your panties in a bunch, kid. I’m sure whatever pretty omega you got your eye on at school is just dandy.” He stabs a gnarled finger in Stiles direction. “No courtin’ until you’ve got that scholarship though. You gotta keep your eyes on the prize.”

“I’m not--”

“Sure you’re not,” his grandfather says derisively, cutting him off. “I wasn’t born yesterday, and I’ve seen it often enough. Alpha’s going all goo goo eyed over the scent of some omega.” He jerks his head in the direction of the television. “That’s why I’m saying omegas shouldn’t serve. It’s a distraction that could cost lives.”

On TV the newsreader cuts to an interview with a leading omega rights campaigner and Stiles’ grandfather trails off, scowling at the screen. “God,” he mutters under his breath. “What is this country coming to? First omegas in the military, next thing you know it’ll be fag alphas wanting to--.” He trails off listening to what the campaigner says and then scoffs loudly.

Stiles swallows hard, his eyes dart back to his mom, but she isn’t paying

attention to either of them; she looks wan and tired. Too many hours at work, too long bowed under the weight of her own grief. She stands there staring down at the clean plate in her hands like she doesn't know where it came from. As he watches she hesitates, then opens the door to the refrigerator and tries to place it inside.

Jesus, she must be more tired than Stiles realized.

"That doesn't go there, mom," he says.

She startles, fumbling the plate, but doesn't drop it. He gestures at one of the low cupboards by the sink with his pen and she nods, smiles weakly.

"Of course! So stupid," she says, with a shrill laugh.

As it turns out, there's nothing funny about it.

-

Stiles gets into UC Irvine on a partial lacrosse scholarship, and he's invited to a kegger at an alpha frat house as part of rush week. While he isn't particularly interested in joining a frat, his roommate Jayden, a fellow alpha, is, and Stiles likes him so he goes along for moral support.

As they approach the house the bass is booming so loud Stiles can feel his teeth ache with it, and when the door opens he almost gags on the overwhelming stench of stale beer and alpha-omega pheromones.

"Woah , " Jayden says, as two omegas approach and offer them beers.

"Holy shit, I am gonna get so drunk."

Seconds later he disappears off into the crowd and Stiles is left alone with one of the omegas, who introduces himself as Mason. He has flawless skin, pierced ears, and he smiles up at Stiles winningly, brown eyes framed with

lashes so thick and dark it looks like he's wearing eyeliner. Sliding one hand across Stiles' chest, he asks, "You wanna dance?"

"Uh," Stiles looks around awkwardly, then, takes a long slug of his beer. "Yeah. Sure," he says, and Mason drags him through the house to the makeshift dance floor.

They dance, and drink, and dance a little more, and then drink again until Stiles is pretty buzzed, and not feeling his nerves. That cocktail of alpha and omega pheromones that made him feel almost sick when he arrived isn't bothering him so much now, senses dulled by alcohol and prolonged exposure.

Mason grinds up against him in time with the beat, and Stiles just goes with it, tries to let himself get lost in the feeling. This is college. He can do this. This is what people do. This is what *alphas* do. They go to college. They find a willing omega, they have casual, consensual sex. It doesn't have to be a big thing. He needs to stop making it a big thing. Maybe if he doesn't overthink it, if he just goes with the flow, it'll happen.

"You're a good dancer," Mason says, turning to face him. He winds his arms around Stiles' neck, pushing into him, and Stiles' arms tighten around his waist automatically, his heart rate tripping up a few notches.

"Thanks," he says.

Mason drops a kiss on the corner of his mouth. "I was--uh-- wondering--" He runs a hand suggestively over Stiles' arm, lingering over the bulge of his bicep. "You wanna go upstairs?"

"What's upstairs?"

"Ha. You're sweet." Mason grins and takes him by the hand, leads him through the hot press of bodies, and up the stairs.

They end up in one of the bathrooms, Mason has him pushed up against the door and they're making out. His tongue is in Stiles' mouth and his fingers

are pulling at Stiles' belt buckle and his sweet scent is everywhere, and growing sweeter by the second. He's rubbing up against Stiles' thigh, making these breathy little moans all the while.

And all at once Stiles isn't muzzy headed anymore.

All at once he's stone cold sober. And sick. Sick to the pit of his stomach. It doesn't feel right-- he can't. He--

Reaching out he places his hands on Mason's shoulders and pushes him back gently, trying to get some space. Mason blinks up at him, lips shiny with spit, eyes bright, scent heavy with the promise of sex. God, Stiles should want him. *Any* alpha would want him. He's beautiful and sweet and sexy-- Stiles isn't even a little hard though, and his head feels like it's spinning. With a grin, Mason leans in to kiss him again, their lips connect for a moment, but it isn't what Stiles wants and he turns his head away.

"What?" Mason says, "Hey, you want me to blow you? Because I can do that." He's already reaching for Stiles' belt again, but Stiles pushes his hand away gently.

"No, I--uh," Stiles swallows, he sways slightly, feels like his legs are gonna buckle.

"Oh my god, are you feeling okay?" Mason asks, face creasing in concern as he studies him more closely. Reaching out, he places a hand on Stiles' chest to steady him. "Because you don't look so good."

"Yeah. I'm not feeling great." Stiles swallows. "I--uh-- I think I need to go home."

"Oh, okay. Sure. Do you have a ride? Or a friend who can--"

"I can walk it. I just need some fresh air to clear my head is all."

"I guess the frat pheromone stink can be kinda intense when you're not used to it. Hey, are you sure you'll be okay?"

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be fine.” Stiles has already turned away, got his hand on the door, when it suddenly occurs to him. “Will you be okay? Can I walk you home or?”

Mason grins. “Awww, sweetie, it’s ten o’clock at night. I plan to be here till at least two.”

“But--” Stiles scowls a little. You hear stories: Omegas unable to protect themselves, who are taken advantage of at things like this. “What if--”

“I have friends here, we have a designated driver, I ate before we arrived, and I only drink drinks I’ve prepared myself. Plus I’m on suppressants, not that *that’s* any of your business now.” He shoots Stiles a pointed look.

“Yeah,” Stiles can feel him self blush. “Sorry about--”

“You don’t need to apologize. You weren’t feeling it, so we stopped. That’s how it should be. It wasn’t a criticism. I just meant, I’m an omega, not a child. I’m used to looking out for myself.”

“Sorry,” Stiles says again. “I don’t-- I’ve never really hung out with an omega before.”

“You’ve hung out with people though, right?” Mason says, but he’s smiling. “I’m joking. You seem like a good guy, and I appreciate your concern. Things *can* be pretty rough out there for us sometimes, but in this instance-- I got it covered.”

Stiles grins weakly, and Mason tilts his head, scrutinizing him closely. “Here, give me your phone,” he says.

“Oh--- I uh--”

“I’m not going to stalk you. I’m going to give you my number. I just want you to text me when you get in, let me know you got home okay. You look like shit.”

“Right, thanks,” Stiles says, standing there feeling stupid. Then, when

Mason clears his throat and reaches out a hand expectantly, Stiles fumbles in the pocket of his jeans for his cell and hands it over.

“There,” Mason says, as his thumb darts across Stiles screen, entering his details. “Text me, okay?”

“Sure.”

Stiles finds Jayden before he leaves, makes sure he’s okay, and then walks the two miles back to his dorm room, lets the cool air take the edge off, tries not to think about how badly he just fucked up.

He can almost hear Scott say, *It’s no big, dude. One day you’re gonna meet the right omega and it’ll all fall into place. Just like in all those dumb movies.*

Except Stiles doesn’t really believe that’s true anymore.

Deep down he hasn’t for a long while.

-

By the time he starts his senior year at high school, Stiles added the following tidbits to his growing hoard of information about Derek Hale:

He lives on the wrong side of town in an apartment with his mom and his two sisters.

He wears scuffed chucks, worn jeans, and the same three henleys on rotation.

His backpack is black, faded, frayed at the edges, and the zipper always sticks. There’s a Cubs button pinned to it.

He's top of their year at English Lit and is probably the best lacrosse player in the school, but he sucks at Physics.

He busses tables at the pizza parlour on Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights, but the money from that job never seems to translate into new clothes, or a car, or even a new backpack.

He likes chocolate pudding cups, bacon, Cool Ranch Doritos, and always orders mac and cheese if it's an option. He appears to have an unholy hatred of grape soda.

He's an alpha.

He isn't applying to college.

He's an alpha. Stiles is an alpha. And yet he smells better to Stiles than any omega he has ever met.

-

Stiles finally drops art half way through his senior year, because his mom is sick. She has rapidly progressive dementia caused by an aggressive, and incurable, underlying cancer. What with that, and lacrosse, and the part time job he's taken at the cinema, plus all the AP classes he's signed up for, he's struggling to maintain his GPA as it is. That's what he tells Ms. Vance, his art teacher, and she tells him she's sad to see him go, but she understands.

Stiles knows he's made the right call, knows he's done the responsible thing, the *alpha* thing. It still sucks, though, because it's the one subject he actually gave a shit about. He had plans, stupid, pie in the sky plans, but he doesn't let himself think about them. Instead he bites his lip, swallows his disappointment down, and makes the best of it. When he mentions the art class to Scott though, he looks crushed.

“Couldn’t you drop something else?” Scott asks, as they’re washing their hands in the boys bathroom at school one lunchtime. “You love art, man. And you’re really good at it.”

Stiles loves Scott, he does, but there are times when his dogged desire to be supportive is-- unhelpful. There’s no way to explain that, though, without seeming like an asshole, so he says, “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does though--”

Behind them the door to the bathroom opens and Stiles hears the footsteps of someone entering, but he doesn’t pay it much mind-- just wants out of this conversation. He snaps, “I have to focus on what’s gonna pay the bills one day in the *real world*. Art isn’t gonna do that. It was never going to do that-- it was a fucking hobby, okay? A waste of time.”

Scott screws up his face in a frown. “I don’t think it’s a waste of time. And Ms. Vance says you’re one of the most gifted--”

“It doesn’t. Matter!”

Scott’s eyebrows disappear into his hairline. Eventually he says, “You stood up to your grandfather to take that class. It’s been your dream to go to art school ever since we were kids--”

“I didn’t stand up to him. I lied to him. There’s a big difference. Besides, dreams don’t pay the bills, Scotty.”

Scott’s mouth turns down, jams his hands into the pockets of his jeans awkwardly. “Look, I know you’re hurting, because of your mom an’ all, and I want to be there for you, but I-- I feel like you’re shutting me out. If you just talk to me--”

At that Stiles snaps. “Oh, you wanna talk? You want to talk? Last night I went to the hospital and my mother couldn’t remember my fucking name. Do you understand me?” he snarls, getting right up in Scott’s face. “There are hospital bills piling up and I have no idea how we’re gonna pay them,

and my mom doesn't know who I am anymore. So maybe shut the fuck up about the fucking art class, and art school, and all of that shit, because it doesn't *fucking* matter." He scrubs his knuckles across his face, eyes stinging with unshed tears.

"Dude, I'm sorry, I--" Scott reaches out a hand, but Stiles shrugs him off.

"I don't want this. Just--" He swallows. "Just give me some space."

"But--"

"I said I need space! Okay? Leave me alone!" He slams his hand against the mirror, has just enough hold left on his temper not to ball his fist, but his palm still stings like a motherfucker.

Scott blinks. "Okay," he says. "Okay. I'll uh-- I'll go." Shoulders hunched, he trudges past Stiles and out of the bathroom, leaving Stiles standing there wanting to tear his own skin off with guilt and frustration.

Breath coming out hard, he rests both hands against the sink and drops his head. He can feel tears pricking his eyes, but he blinks them back, swallows them down. Reaching out he turns the faucet on, lets the water run cold over his stinging palm and then splashes some on his face, catching his hair in the process. When he looks up in the mirror he sees Derek Hale standing a little ways behind him, watching. Their gaze locks for a moment, and Stiles dimly remembers hearing the bathroom door open in the middle of the fight with Scott. Of course it would be Derek, that's-- that's just how Stiles' life works.

"You gotta problem, Hale?" Stiles says, turning to him, but there's no bite to it. He's suddenly, overwhelmingly, too exhausted to care.

Derek looks pale under the fluorescent light of the bathroom. He doesn't speak, but his eyes rake Stiles' face, and on anyone else, Stiles might call the expression concern. The thought makes him shiver.

Slowly, hesitantly, Derek takes a step toward Stiles, then another, and

another, until there's barely a foot between them.

Carefully he reaches up with his right hand, like he's going to run the calloused pad of his thumb along the high arch of Stiles' cheekbone, and collect the unshed tears that cling to the lower lashes. The thought makes Stiles jerk his head back a little, staring at him with wide, scared eyes. Derek drops his hand to his side but doesn't step away. Instead he opens his mouth. Takes a breath. Says, "Sti--"

The door to the bathroom crashes open. The spell is broken. They spring apart guiltily, as a swarm of students pile through the open doorway.

Without another word, Stiles turns on his heel and leaves.

-

Stiles is eating lunch at the kitchen table while making flashcards for his chem final one Saturday when his grandfather stomps into the room.

"You made a decision about colleges yet?" He's clutching a letter in the curl of his fist, and Stiles recognizes it immediately. He must have been going through Stiles' stuff again under the pretense of 'tidying' his room. Stiles puts down his sandwich and his pen, and sighs.

"If you've read that letter then you know UC Irvine offered me a partial lacrosse scholarship, but I--I can't go to college." His mom died a month ago, and even though her illness was short, not lasting longer than a year, the estate had to use Stiles' college fund to pay the resulting medical bills. "We can't afford--"

"Bullshit," his grandfather says gruffly, reaching into his pocket for a pack of cigarettes.

"But--"

“We can make it work.” He taps the end of the pack, and then opens it taking one out. “And you are *going* to college.”

“I don’t--”

“Look,” he pulls up a chair at the table and takes a seat next to Stiles, and lights his cigarette. “Your parents had a small life insurance policy for your dad, and when he died, your mom used it to take a bite out of the mortgage on this place. So the remaining repayments aren’t as bad as they might be.”

“Okay. But college? I’ve only been offered a partial scholarship and my college fund is gone--”

“Let me finish!” His grandfather’s eyebrows pull down and he scowls. “My pension will help cover the mortgage on this place, and I have some savings from the sale of my place in Kentucky. I can cover the remainder of your college tuition.” He pauses, taking another drag on his cigarette, and when he exhales, acrid blue smoke curls out of his nose and drifts upwards.

“I--” Stiles trails off, shoulders dipping in shock. “I don’t know what to say.”

His grandfather shrugs. “It’s not a debate. We’re family. Besides, my grandson the alpha is going to college. We need to get that criminology degree under your belt. Forget county sheriff, I’m gonna see you as police commissioner one day!” He slaps Stiles on the back and wheezes with laughter.

Stiles smiles weakly. “Then I guess-- I guess I’m saying thanks. That’s-- that’s amazing.”

His grandfather gives him one last hearty slap on his shoulder, and then gets to his feet. “Good. Okay. I’m making coffee, you wanna cup?”

Stiles shakes his head, and turns back to his studies, but he can’t concentrate.

He should feel grateful. He knows he should feel grateful.

Given the circumstances it's more than he could ever have expected, and it takes a huge amount of financial pressure off him.

Yeah, he should be grateful.

He can't feel gratitude though. Can't feel much of anything anymore, he's numb to the world around him. One day he'll wake up and find he's eight years old, his dad made it home from the store and his mom is queuing up *Empire Strikes Back* on the DVD, and the last ten years will have been a bad dream.

Except it isn't, and he won't. His parents are gone, and what his grandfather's offering is generous. Real generous.

It just-- isn't what Stiles wants, but he's starting to learn that *that* doesn't matter.

-

They lose the last lacrosse game of their senior year, and while it was an exhibition match, and doesn't affect anything really, Jackson Whittemore, the rich beta kid with a bad alpha attitude, is mouthing off. His daddy donates enough money to the school that he's captain of the team, despite having the people skills of a toddler on a sugar high having a tantrum.

"God, I will be so glad when I don't have to play with you losers anymore," he mutters, slamming the door to his locker shut. "When I get to Harvard--"

Stiles tunes him out. Concentrates on peeling himself out of his jersey, but when he glances up, he catches Derek's eye and they share a vaguely amused look. Jackson, man. Harvard can have him.

"Hey," Jackson says, rounding on Derek and catching the fading remnants of the smile. "You think it's funny?"

Derek is sitting on the bench, unlacing his cleats. At that though, he looks up at Jackson, eyes flicking over him kinda slow, but he doesn't say anything.

"I'm talking to you," Jackson says, stepping over to him and standing right in front of him. "What's so funny? Don't roll your eyes." He leans down so he and Derek are almost nose to nose. "Beacon Heights trash like you is lucky to have a place on this team. Hell, you're lucky they let you into this goddamn school!"

"Jackson--" someone, probably Danny, says.

"No! I saw him looking at me, smirking, like he's so much better because he's an alpha. Well, guess what? You live in a slum, and you work at the pizza place bussing tables, and this--" He makes a sweeping gesture with his arm. "Getting into this school and onto this team? This was always gonna be the highlight of your life. I'm going to Harvard, dick. But it's never getting better than this for you. So why don't you go back to whatever shitty apartment you live in, and your shitty service job, and find some needy fucking omega to--"

Stiles isn't sure when he moves. All he knows is one minute Jackson is right up in Derek's space spitting bile, and then next there's a tremendous clang and Stiles has him pinned to the lockers, by his throat. "Shut. The fuck. Up," he grinds out.

Jackson's wide eyed with shock; he opens his mouth to try and speak but no sound comes out. His face is slowly turning puce.

Stiles hears someone, possibly Scott, say his name, but all he can see in front of him is Jackson's face staring at him, eyes wide and terrified. The stink of fear coming off him in waves. Stiles tightens his grip slightly, and Jackson makes a noise that can only be described as a meep.

"Hey!" A large, warm hand presses into his shoulder like a brand. "Hey, Stilinski-- Stilinski!" It's Derek. It's Derek's voice. Derek's scent filling his nostrils. Derek standing so close to him, Stiles can feel the heat bleeding off

him. Blinking, Stiles turns his head to look at him.

“He isn’t worth it,” Derek says, staring straight at him. “He isn’t worth it. Let him go.” He places his other hand on Stiles’ forearm, and Stiles finds his gaze dropping to stare at the place where skin meets skin. He loosens his grip.

Immediately Jackson pushes his way past both of them, frightened and all the more belligerent because of his fear. “I’m reporting you to the coach!” he shouts, as he backs away. “I’m going to tell my father. I’m going to file a restraining order against you, you fucking psychopath.” The door to the locker room slams shut behind him.

The rest of the team stare at each other. Then with a sigh Danny says, “I’ll go talk to him.”

When Stiles looks around, blinking, he sees Derek is back at the bench, crouching down to unlace his cleats like nothing has happened. Stiles can still feel the ghost of his touch against his arm like a brand.

“Are you okay, dude?” Scott says, coming over to him. “Because that was--”

“I’m fine,” Stiles says, interrupting him, his eyes still fixed on Derek. “I just--uh--I’m gonna use the bathroom.”

He disappears off to the boys bathroom, locks himself in a stall and scrubs a shaking hand over his face. Forces himself to breathe. Breathe. Don’t freak out. Breathe.

When he finally emerges ten minutes later, most of the guys are in the shower, including Scott and Derek, and Stiles spends longer than he needs to taking off his pads, his cleats, peeling off his jersey. One of the many unspoken rules that have developed between him and Derek since they both presented, is that they never shower at the same time. Not ever.

So it isn’t until Derek re-enters the locker room, towel slung low on his

hips, that Stiles slips past him to clean up. Standing under the water, he turns the pressure up high as it will go, and lets the hot water drum against his skin, leaving it red and raw; he closes his eyes and imagines that it can wash away more than just dirt and grass stains. One by one his teammates drift out, until he's the only one left in there. Scott has a date with Kira, so Stiles doesn't even have to deal with his concern- can just slink home alone to try and swallow the hot ball of shame that's lodged in his throat.

When he finally turns the water off, wraps his towel around himself and pads back through, he isn't surprised to find the locker room is empty. As he rounds the corner though, he inhales sharply. Derek is still there, fully dressed, sitting on one of the benches, elbows resting on his knees staring down at his hands. His dark hair is still damp from his own shower, it looks a little softer than usual with no product in it. What's more, he's seated directly opposite Stiles' locker, and at Stiles' approach, he looks up.

"You want something, Hale?" Stiles says, more casually than he feels considering they're alone, and he's naked save for the towel around his waist. His hands shake slightly as he enters the combination for his locker. Opening the door he reaches in and blindly yanks out his t-shirt.

His eyes dart back to Derek, who looks away quickly. "I--yeah."

Once Stiles pulls his t-shirt over his head, he feels a little more courageous. "What?" he asks, reaching for more clothes.

"I wanted to--" Derek looks down at his hands again. "You didn't have to do that-- earlier."

Stiles shrugs and carefully puts on his underwear without dislodging the towel around his hips, then reaches for his jeans. "Jackson's a dick. He deserved it." Turning his back to Derek he drops his towel, and pulls his jeans on quickly, fingers fumbling over the button.

"Yeah," Derek says with a sigh. When Stiles turns back to look at him the tips of his ears are red, and he's staring determinedly off to one side.

Watching Derek out the corner of his eye, Stiles stuffs his wet towel and his lacrosse gear haphazardly into his bag then grabs his socks and shoes, and looks around himself, torn. If he tries to put his socks on standing up he'll be hopping around on one foot like an idiot, but if he sits on the bench next to Derek then-- he swallows.

After a moment's hesitation he hikes his bag over his shoulder and walks around, takes a seat on the opposite side of the bench to Derek, with his back to him. It feels safe. As safe as it can be. "Is that all you wanted to say?" he asks, voice coming out a little uneven, as he bends over, to tug on socks.

Maybe the fact that they can't look at each other now works for Derek too though, because after a moment he speaks. "What Jackson said. They were just words. He doesn't matter. I don't care what he thinks of me."

Stiles toes his shoes on, jams his fingers down to hook the backs over his heels, his heart beating frantically in his chest. When he risks looking back over his shoulder, he sees Derek has turned his head to look at him. Stiles' mouth feels dry. "Doesn't change the fact that he deserved it."

The corner of Derek's mouth turns up in the barest suggestion of a smile. "Maybe. But you don't have to fight for m--" He checks himself. Swallows. "--you don't have to fight all the time."

Stiles releases a startled bark of laughter. "Maybe *you* don't," he says, standing to his feet. "That's never been an option for me." He grabs his bag and heads towards the door. When he reaches it he turns, looks back, sees Derek still watching him. "Later, Hale."

"Stilinski," Derek says, with a little nod of his head, expression perfectly blank.

Stiles lets the door slam shut behind him.

That's the last time they speak before Stiles leaves for college.

-

This isn't Stiles' real life. He decided that a long time ago.

When his dad died it was a shock. It was a grenade that exploded without warning. One minute Stiles was a normal kid and the next it felt like he was sprawled on the floor bleeding out, and he never really knew what hit him.

When his mom died it was different. He had some warning, he knew it was coming. Maybe that should make it easier, should have given him a chance to prepare. Except it wasn't and it didn't. It was still a bomb exploding, leaving devastation in its wake, but this time it happened in slow motion. He felt like Neo, in the Matrix, dodging bullets, except Stiles couldn't dodge them, and he couldn't throw his body over his mom to protect her. No. He got to see every piece of shrapnel that tore into them, rending her flesh, splintering his soul. Got to see it all up close and personal, and was powerless to stop it. The last time he saw her she was pale, translucent, lacking strength to even open her eyes, let alone make a sound. Even if she could, though he isn't sure it would have helped-- by that point she hadn't been able to remember his name for a month.

In truth he's disfigured by grief, if he could cut himself open it'd just be a mesh of scar tissue, criss-crossed overlapping, all hard gristle, no feeling left but pain. Not that anyone seems to realize. He has clear skin and shiny white teeth, he's funny and fairly popular and he works hard. He has a 4.0 and a partial sports scholarship to a good school. He's on track to be fucking salutatorian. That's all anyone seems to see. Yet there are days when his chest feels so tight he can barely draw breath. Like he's drowning on dry land, and no one else has noticed.

So, no. This isn't his real life. It's a fucking cruel joke is what it is.

-

Stiles does text Mason to let him know he got home safely, and two days later, Mason texts back to see if he wants to meet up. It turns out he's a sophomore, and he works at the Peets Coffee and Tea, on campus. Stiles visits him on his lunch break and Mason makes Stiles a flat white and himself an espresso. Then they sit at a table in the far corner and share a crumbly blueberry muffin.

"So," Mason says, taking a sip from his coffee. "What are you studying?"

"Criminology."

"Ooh, you want a career in law enforcement, huh?" he says and Stiles smiles faintly.

"What about you?"

"I'm pre-law."

"Woah."

"Yeah, everyone makes that face," he grins, tapping a finger against his chin playfully. "An omega who's a lawyer? Seriously? Aren't you supposed to be weak and submissive? What about heats? What if you have to go up against an Alpha in court? How will you ever win a case?"

"I didn't--" Stiles starts to protest.

"No, but lots of people think it. They make snide little comments and insinuations, like I won't get what they really mean." He leans forward and takes a pinch of muffin between his thumb and forefinger, popping it into his mouth. "Fuck them, that's what I say."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. There’s so much bullshit around it all, y’know. Who omegas are, what we can be. Like we’re less capable because--” He stops himself and then flashes a grin at Stiles. “Sorry. I get carried away.” He reaches between them again and takes more of the muffin.

“It’s okay,” Stiles says. “I’m interested. Which law school do you want to go to?”

“Cornell, if I can get it.”

“That’s a great school.”

Mason sucks the remaining muffin crumbs off his finger and thumb, then leans back in his chair, eyes narrowing as his gaze flicks over Stiles.

“Sooooo,” he says eventually. “You’re not like other alphas, are you?”

Every muscle in Stiles’ body seems to tense. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you haven’t even tried to scent me or offered to pay for the food, or tried to compliment me. I tell you I wanna go to Cornell and you’re polite and sincere, no gushing compliments, or derisive laughter.” He leans forward in his chair, elbows resting on the table, hands clasped. “What’s your deal?”

“My--My deal?”

“Yeah, are you super religious? Or are you already mated? Because we made out the other night, and I didn’t see a bond bite but that would be pretty shi--”

“Noooo. No.” Stiles holds his hands up defensively.

“So--” Mason leans back again, nonplussed. “You’re just not-- into me?”

“Uhhhhmmm. Sorry?”

“No.” He leans back in his chair. “It’s fine. Refreshing actually. I figured after the party the other day maybe you just had too much to drink, and

that's why we didn't-- but you're not--" he tilts his head looking at Stiles, who shrinks a little under his gaze.

"I like you," Mason says decisively, a smile spreading slowly across his face. "We can be friends."

"Thanks?"

"You should thank me. I'm an awesome friend."

Stiles grins at that, rolls his eyes.

"You'll see," Mason says.

Stiles' freshman year at college slips by in a blur of early morning lectures, late night parties, and twelve hour shifts at Peets, after Mason talks the manager into giving him a job. Stiles calls his grandfather once a week, and Skypes regularly with Scott, who's at San Diego State, and still moping about his break up with Kira. Stiles keeps his head down, works hard, tries not to think too much, and refuses to open his sketchpad and draw.

Mason becomes a little obsessed with his love life, or lack thereof, and tries to set him up on blind dates with other omegas three times-- on each occasion it's a mess. The first two are painfully polite dinner dates, with stilted conversation, followed by an awkward drive home.

"Maybe dinner is too formal," Mason says, after the second blind date ends without so much as a kiss goodnight or the promise of meeting again. "Too much pressure. You're kinda shy so maybe if you try the cinema it'll go easier." In his whole life, nobody has ever described Stiles as shy before, but he shrugs and doesn't say anything.

For the third blind date, Stiles takes Heather, a blonde, omega, comp sci student from Iowa, out to the cinema. He kinda likes Heather, unlike the others Stiles dated, they seem to be able to talk to each other, and he even manages to make her laugh. The film is a cheesy action movie with a macho alpha hero out to save the world and woo their omega in the process.

It has a terrible plot and too much CGI, but he and Heather whisper snarky comments about the awful acting to each other in the back row of the cinema, and somehow it doesn't seem so bad. He actually kinda-- enjoys himself? Heather, it turns out, is genuinely funny and he likes her as a person.

After the movie they head out to a diner and order milkshakes, then he drives her back home. They park up outside her halls and she invites him up to her room, and he feels like-- like if it's ever gonna work with an omega, it's gonna be her. So he follows her up and somehow they end up lying on her bed, making out a little. She kisses him sweetly, skin warm and pliant, responsive to his touch. He doesn't know what he's doing, but eventually she guides his hand between her legs and grinds against his fingers till she comes with a breathy sigh. He can't seem to get hard at all, though, and all at once it's that old familiar discordant sensation, like everyone else knows this one song, can sing it in perfect harmony, and he never learned the words, let alone the tune. So he makes his apologies: An important test, a long day, hardly any sleep-- and says he should be getting back.

"We're not gonna do this again, are we?" she says as she hugs him goodbye in the doorway to her room.

"I--" he doesn't know what to say. He feels selfish and stupid and exposed. Guilty-- because for one moment he really thought he could fix this, or at least pretend, but in the end she's just another waypoint in the the endless quest to try and force himself into a shape that doesn't fit. "I'm sorry," he says helplessly, because that's as honest as he can allow himself to be, and he owes her that much.

"It's okay," she says, reaching out a hand and stroking his cheek.
"Sometimes the chemistry isn't right."

He echoes her words later that evening when Mason texts to see how the date went.

Chemistry wasn't right. Don't set me up again

You're sure??? :(

Yeah I just gotta figure things out for myself

The thing is, there isn't much of anything to figure out. There's this part of himself that he's locked away, deep in his own mind, and he's invested so much energy pretending it isn't there, that most days it's all he can think about.

It all comes to a head two months later at a party in his halls. There's a guy, an alpha, Ethan something-- Stiles never does find out his last name-- but they end up drunkenly giving each other handjobs in a literal closet and later, when Stiles is sober, the irony of that isn't lost on him. At the time, though, he comes so hard he thinks he can hear colors, and after that it becomes more difficult to pretend it isn't what it is.

Ethan gets his number from a friend, and texts him later, asks if he wants to meet again.

Meeting again, leads to Stiles getting on his knees in a bathroom stall and feeling the weight of that huge alpha cock in his mouth, letting himself be thoroughly used. Two days later, Stiles texts Ethan again, unable to stop thinking about it, and Ethan invites him up to his room while his roommate is out. Stiles fucks him into the bed, hips snapping as he sets a brutal pace.

Afterwards, starfished on the comforter, Ethan asks if he wants to go for coffee, but Stiles isn't interested, it sounds like a precursor to something more and that isn't what he wants-- he isn't even sure if he likes Ethan that much. Honestly? The guy seems like kind of a dick. Stiles figures maybe he's a dick too sometimes though, so maybe he shouldn't judge.

Still, he makes his excuses. Says he doesn't think they should see each other again.

"Look, it's fine if you just wanna fuck," Ethan says, lifting his head. "It was just a coffee."

Stiles tugs his t-shirt over his head and shrugs. "Sorry," he says, and

crouching down, crawls under the bed to find his shoes.

There are a couple of other alphas after that, a pale-skinned redheaded girl who he eats out in the library stacks, a tall black guy who he meets at a club, and fucks up against a wall in an alley, stripping the guy's cock with his fist, as he drives relentlessly into him; biting down on his own lip to stop from making any noise when he comes.

It's sex. It's just sex.

That's all he'll let it be.

-

Summer break of Stiles' freshman year at college Scott stays on in San Diego because he's met a girl, which leaves Stiles kicking around Beacon Hills without much to do. A couple of days after he arrives home, his grandfather points to the backyard, which hasn't really been touched since Stiles' mom died, save to cut the grass. The flower beds are a snarl of weeds and brambles. "That's your project for the summer," he says, and Stiles has to stop himself rolling his eyes.

When he checks the garage most of the tools he needs to actually deal with it are rusted beyond repair, which is how he ends up in a nursery on the outskirts of town, testing the weight of a shovel in his hands. He doesn't pay much attention to the sound of footsteps behind him, or the way they stutter to a stop-- but he sure as hell pays attention to the voice.

"Stilinski?"

Stiles wheels round; the shovel slips out of his grasp and clatters to the floor. "Hale?"

Derek looks-- like Derek always looks. Tall, broad, with jet black hair and indescribable eyes, all that's different now is the scruff. That, well-- that's definitely new.

Stiles wets his lips. "What are you doing here?"

"I work here." Derek gestures to a nametag that's pinned to a dark blue apron, that Stiles probably should've noticed. "Are you--uh--"

"Back from college for the summer."

"Right-- yeah." Derek swallows, eyes raking over him. "Well--"

"Oh my god! Stiles!" They both startle guiltily even though all they've been done is stand there. Stiles wheels round to see Kira hurtling towards him. She's wearing the same navy blue apron as Derek, and a smile a mile wide .

"Hey!" he says, almost tripping over his fallen shovel as she launches herself at him.

"Look at you!" she says, "You look so pale."

"Student." He gestures at himself awkwardly. "I live on ramen and I don't go outside during daylight hours if I can help it."

"Ha!" She grins, looking between the two of them. "Oh my god. It's like a Beacon Hills High reunion." With a hand she reaches out and tugs Derek in by his sleeve, until she can get an arm round both of them. "We should totally meet later and catch up. All three of us. Whaddya say?"

"Uh--" Stiles' eyes flick to Derek and away, back to Kira.

She isn't looking at Stiles though, her eyes are focussed on Derek, and she squeezes his shoulder.

"I'd like that," he says quietly.

“Stiles?” she turns to look at him.

“Um. Sure,” he says.

“Great! I’ll text you, your number’s still the same, right?” He nods.

“Awesome. Okay. I gotta go, I’m dealing with a customer. Catch you later!”

And then she’s gone in a whirl of enthusiasm, leaving Derek and Stiles standing there awkwardly.

“So,” Stiles says, “does anyone else from our senior year work here or?”

“Just me and Kira,” Derek says. “Her parents own this place. She got me a job here after high school.”

“I thought she was at college--”

“She is, but she didn’t go far-- and she still picks up shifts here when she’s home.” Crouching down, he picks up the shovel that Stiles dropped, and looks up with those startling blue-green eyes. “You still want this?” he asks, offering it up, gaze intense.

“Yeah,” Stiles says, flushing pink as his fingers curve around the handle.

“Yeah, I do.”

-

They meet at a mom and pop diner on Alder, later that evening. Stiles is late, he spent too long standing at home in front of his closet freaking out over what to wear, before finally going with his obligatory uniform of jeans, graphic tee and a plaid shirt. When he finally arrives, the others are already there, Kira in a sundress, and Derek looking oddly formal in tight jeans and a pale gray button down. They take a seat in a booth and order

fries to share and order a diet coke each.

“So! Tell us all about Irvine,” Kira says, taking a sip of her drink. “What are you majoring in? I can’t remember.”

“Criminology,” Stiles says.

“Are you enjoying it?”

“It’s okay.” He shrugs. “What about you?”

“Microbiology. I’m at Sacramento State, which isn’t that far really. It’s like maybe an hour and a half if I don’t hit traffic. I pick up shifts at the nursery when I’m on breaks, and even at the weekends sometimes, if they need me.”

They chat like that for a little. Kira’s good at keeping the conversation going and Stiles is pretty good at that too. At one point she ducks her head shyly and asks about Scott. It was a difficult break up, but not an acrimonious one, and Stiles tells her a little about what he’s up to, but not about the new girlfriend.

Derek sits there quietly, doesn’t say much, but Stiles can feel the weight of his gaze whenever it rests on him, making his skin prickle. A year has passed since they last saw each other, and Stiles really thought he was over this. Thought that the burning awareness of Derek Hale which had plagued him most of his life was a thing of the past. It should be out of his system by now, he thinks, taking a long swallow of his coke, and chancing a glance at Derek over the rim of the glass. He has to find a way to get it out of his system.

“Okay,” Kira says, “I gotta head back home to my bed. I’m visiting a friend in LA tomorrow, and I gotta get an early start.” She gets to her feet.

“Sure,” Stiles says, standing with her.

“You guys should stay,” she says, waving him back into his seat. “Just because I’m cutting away early, doesn’t mean you two can’t catch up.”

“Right,” Stiles says, eyes darting to Derek. “I mean--”

“I’ll see you at work tomorrow,” she says, planting a kiss on Derek’s cheek. “Stiles. Always a pleasure.”

Two seconds later, she’s gone, and it’s just he and Derek sitting opposite each other in the booth, with a half plate of cold fries between them, and a bunch of empty glasses.

“Sooooo,” Stiles says eventually, chancing a glance at Derek, once the silence that descends between them threatens to swallow them whole.

Derek drums his fingers against the arm of his chair. “You wanna get out of here?”

“Yeah,” Stiles nods. He thinks maybe they’re on the same page after all. “Definitely.”

They settle the bill and then walk out onto the street, as the sun dips low in the sky, and a cool evening breeze is lending chill to the air.

“Where are you parked?” Derek asks.

Stiles jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “What about you?”

“Laura dropped me off. She has the car this evening, so--” He jams his hands in his pockets, looking down.

Stiles shifts foot to foot, anticipation coiling in his gut. “I could--uh-- give you a lift back if you want.”

Derek’s gaze flicks up to meet his, and Stiles can’t parse the expression on his face. “Okay,” he says, after a long moment. “Thanks.”

Stiles doesn’t know what he expected. Maybe for Derek to suggest that they take a detour, and then maybe they’d end up in the preserve, or at a make out point or something. Somewhere secluded where they can finally work

through this thing that simmers between them in peace. He doesn't though, and Stiles certainly isn't gonna initiate it, so instead they drive back to Derek's place in a silence that is broken only by Derek's brusque directions.

Beacon Heights isn't somewhere Stiles has spent much time, although he has fuzzy memories of his dad mentioning it from time to time, and everyone in the county knows it by reputation. Block after block of slate gray apartment buildings, with peeling paintwork, the odd abandoned lot overgrown with weeds, They pass a liquor store with flickering neon sign, and more than once he hears a siren wail in the distance. The people on the streets walk quickly, shoulders hunched, heads down, not making eye contact.

The further they get into Beacon Heights, the more surly and monosyllabic Derek seems to become, arms folded across his chest like he's trying to protect himself from whatever Stiles is thinking.

"Here," he says, gesturing, and Stiles pulls over outside an old apartment building; the windows on the ground floor apartment are barred, and there's graffiti all over the building next door.

Derek unclips his belt. "Thanks for the ride," he says, eyes downcast, as he climbs out of the car.

Stiles watches him head toward his building, stomach churning. He can't stand it-- can't fucking stand the idea that this might be it. Can't stop thinking that with every step Derek takes, this weird, fucked up connection between them is stretching, taut, brittle. Like it might snap at any moment.

Stiles has just lived a year without Derek Hale in his life at all, and if Derek walks away now, it feels like it could be another year, or two, or ten, before they ever speak again. He doesn't want that.

"Hey!" Stiles calls, scrambling out of his jeep slamming the door shut. "Hey, Hale! Wait!" Derek's almost at the alleyway that runs between his building and the one next door, but he stops. Half turns. The streetlamp outside the building flickers to life, it's dull orange glow catching the planes

of Derek's face, the sullen tilt to his mouth.

"What, Stilinski?" he snaps. "Did I leave something in your piece of shit car?"

Stiles stumbles back a step, stung.

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"Oh my god," Mason says, as he walks through the door to Stiles' dorm room. "This is tragic. You're a freshman. Midterms are long gone. Finals are weeks away. It's sunny outside. How are you still working?"

"I have to--"

"No! We're going to the park," Mason says, dragging Stiles out of his chair and pushing him towards his closet. "If you're gonna insist on working on your day off, than you're gonna work outside in the sunshine. Now get dressed."

They find a sunny hill in Aldrich park and Mason sprawls out on the grass, hands tucked behind his head, sunglasses jammed on his nose, while Stiles hunkers down next to him, and starts to take the books he brought with him from his bag. For a long while there's nothing except the sound of Stiles' pen scritch across the paper as he makes notes. Although he can feel Mason watching him.

"You know what I don't understand?" Mason says eventually.

"What's that?"

"Why someone who so hates their major as much as you do, invests so much effort in it."

Stiles blinks, pen hovering just above the paper. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Mason rolls onto his side to face him. “Yes you do.”

“I--”

“Don’t even,” he says, peering at Stiles over the rim of his sunglasses.

“My grandfather--” Stiles says eventually. “He was a cop and my dad was a cop and--”

“So? My dad’s a mechanic. I’m gonna go to law school. Just because your parents do something doesn’t mean you have to do it too.” He sits up a little. “If you could do anything, any major. What would you choose for yourself?”

Stiles turns back to his notes, and doesn’t say anything.

“I’m serious!” Mason continues. “Any major. Your grandfather doesn’t get a say. The world is your fucking oyster. Come on!”

“I would have applied to the Rhode Island School of Design,” Stiles admits eventually, mainly to shut him up. “I probably wouldn’t have got in, but--”

“Art school?” Mason sits up a little straighter. “Seriously? You’re an artist?”

“No! No. I--No. Well--”

“Can I see something you’ve drawn. Can I?”

Stiles hesitates. He hasn’t drawn anything in well over a year, not since the day his mom died, but he still has his sketchbook. He brings it with him everywhere-- force of habit. With a deep sigh he rifles through his bag, takes it out and hands it over.

Mason takes it immediately and flips it open. “Oh my god,” he says, slowly

turning the pages. “Oh. My. God. These are amazing.” He sucks in a breath.

“Thanks,” Stiles says. He doesn’t look at Mason. Can’t. Instead he ducks his head and goes back to his books, but he can still hear the paper rustle as Mason turns each page.

They sit in silence like that a while, until eventually Mason blows out a long sigh.

“Why are you *here* ?” He says it so plaintively Stiles almost wants to laugh.

“Because,” he says, imitating his grandfather’s gruff tone. “You got brains, kid, and you’re an alpha, not a pussy. You gotta make something of yourself, provide for your family. Art is a waste of fucking time. Alphas don’t *do* art.”

“Seriously?”

Stiles shrugs.

Mason’s shoulders sag a little and he’s quiet a long while after that, unnaturally still, staring down at Stiles’ sketchbook, before he slowly starts to turn back through the pages. “God,” he says at last, voice cracking over the words. “It’s all *still* so fucked up, isn’t it?”

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“I don’t know what you want--” Derek says stonily.

“You don’t know?” Stiles mocks, and shoves him a little; he stumbles back a step.

“This isn’t JV lacrosse practice anymore, Stilinski. Push me again. I dare you.”

There's never been anyone who gets under his skin as quickly and completely as Derek can.

"Yeah?" Stiles says, and lunges at him.

Derek's ready for him, hands reaching out to grip him by the shoulders, fingers digging in hard, attempting to hold him at arm's length as they grapple with each other. Derek's got a little more bulk and, as they stumble into the alleyway, he throws his weight forward, sending Stiles off balance in a way that sends them both crashing into the side of the large, square trash cans that sit at the entrance.

As they scuffle, Stiles' feet slip against the floor, his hands clawing into Derek's biceps he tries to get purchase and really throw his weight behind it. Face screwed up in frustration, Derek grunts muscles flexing as he pushes back, hard as he can. It's enough to send Stiles staggering backwards, and he almost falls, but he's quicker than Derek, with good instincts, and he twists at the last minute, uses the momentum to slam Derek back into the wall of the alley, winded and breathless. With a pained 'oof', Derek loosens his grip and Stiles presses home his advantage.

"Fuck you," Stiles pants, hands rushing to pin Derek's arms to the wall in a vice like grip.

"Yeah?" There's this weird little smirk on Derek's face, and his breath is coming out ragged.

"Yeah," Stiles says, and his gaze drops, lingering on Derek's parted lips, hypnotized by the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest, the way his breath settles damp against Stiles' cheek. There's a scent in the air, and it isn't anger or frustration anymore. It's deeper. Richer. Heady. When Stiles' eyes dart up and meet Derek's again, the energy between them shifts and Stiles' world tilts on its axis a couple of degrees and suddenly everything slots into place.

He lets go of Derek, lunges for the zipper of his jeans, and at the exact same time, Derek reaches down and yanks the button on Stiles' fly open. It feels

like a race, like a competition, and Stiles wins, has tugged Derek's jeans open and his underwear down and has a hand around him, before Derek has finished fumbling with Stiles' fly. Derek swears lowly, arching a little at the touch of Stiles' fingers, but a moment later it's Stiles who hisses as the cool evening air hits his hard cock, and he feels Derek's warm palm wrap around him and jack him a couple of times. It's dry. Just the wrong side of too much, and he lets go of Derek long enough to spit in his own palm a couple of times, then knocks Derek's hand away and gets a grip round them both.

"Oh god," Derek mumbles and leans in, like he might be aiming for a kiss, and Stiles turns his head away, buries it in the crook of Derek's shoulder, looking down so he can see his hand wrapped tight around them. Then he takes in deep juddering breaths of that fucking awesome scent and his starts to work furiously. Little shocks of sensation ping through him, and heat curls low in his stomach. There's no way he's gonna last, but he can't stop now. This is a runaway train and it's not gonna stop until it crashes.

"Fuck," Stiles chants. "Fuck. Fuck."

Derek mashes his face against the side of Stiles' head, hands holding onto Stiles' hips so hard it hurts. Stiles feels him tense and then shake apart; he moans low like it's been dragged from him, as his body arches up against Stiles. And the smell of it, the feel of his release, sticky and wet all over Stiles' hand, is enough to send him tipping over too with a strangled gasp.

They stand there shaky, curled into each other, but as the fog of Stiles' orgasm lifts it sinks in. He stumbles back a step and eyes skating over Derek's crumpled shirt. There's blood drying on his lip too, probably from where he caught himself on the side of the trash can when they fell against it. God knows what Stiles must look like, fucking debauched, probably. He bore the brunt of everything and his t-shirt is covered in come; his hips feel bruised. With a deep breath, Stiles takes a step back and tucks himself back into his underwear, carefully zipping up his jeans. After a beat Derek starts to do the same.

"You wanna borrow a shirt?" he asks, gaze lingering over the mess on Stiles' t-shirt, and then catching on his hands which are slick and sticky too.

With a smirk Stiles wipes them off on side of his t-shirt, where it's still dry, best he can.

"Might be an idea." Stiles hesitates, winces. "Wait, is your mom--?"

"Everyone's out." Derek turns, stalking down the alley. "Come on."

Stiles hurries after him.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Next chapter. I upped the chapter count because it's taking so long to write, and I felt bad. So here. Have what I've written!

Chapter Notes

This has taken a long time to get here. In all honesty, I was so inspired for this fic at first and so excited to publish that first chapter and then I kind of lost my mojo.

The truth is the first comment I received on that first chapter was a patronizing anon who clearly hadn't even bothered to read the chapter and although I argued my side with them, and they eventually apologized and even asked me to delete the thread, (which I did-- although not before things got real weird and uncomfortable), it killed my muse for this fic, and it's gone from being something that I really wanted to write, to being something I'm struggling with. I am trying to power through, because I hate to leave work unfinished and because all the rest of the comments were so wonderful. I feel terrible about it and I'm sorry.

Anyway, I want to thank everyone who did leave me a lovely comment on the previous chapter. Seriously, they were amazing. You guys are the only reason that this is still going AT ALL.

On the basis of what happened last time though, I am locking this fic so that only those who are logged in can see it/ comment on it.

Anyway the last chapter was non linear, this chapter isn't because as we progress into the story the flashbacks become less necessary, and we really begin to focus on Stiles and Derek and their growing relationship.

ALSO. Before anyone tells me that Derek's mom's name is Talia and that she doesn't have red hair, I'll point out that in this 'verse, Derek had two moms. Also you will find out what happened to Talia, just not in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Until Stiles experiences it for himself, he doesn't understand why it's called a heat. After his first time, well, he gets it. It's-- feverish. That's how he describes it to Scott once it's passed, keeping details to a minimum. Hot and sweaty and awkward, his whole world narrowed down to a pinhead, one overwhelming desire, as he dry humps his pillow, fist curled tight around his knot and imagines--

Well.

He imagines a lot of things that don't matter.

They don't count.

It's a heat.

A rut.

He can't be responsible for what he thinks about when he's in heat. There are fucking laws regulating heats because omegas and alphas are so vulnerable when they experience them. So.

So.

Heat after heat passes, and he accepts that when he's in the throes of it he

can't control who he is-- what he imagines. Every time it passes, the uncertainty sets in, an anxious knot of something just shy of shame settling in his stomach. He strips his bed, sticks his sheets on the hottest wash he can, then showers, keeps the water just shy of scalding as he pushes those feelings down, tries to forget.

It doesn't work, reminders are everywhere. He can't stop comparing himself to every movie or TV show he's ever watched, every book he's ever read where the omega and alpha ride off into the sunset together. Then there's the sting he feels every time anyone from his mom or Scott, to strangers in the grocery store, talk about how great it'll be when finally finds the right omega. The one. His mate. That's how it works after all. Mated pairs. Mated for life. Meant to be. Like alphas and omegas are destined to be together. Virtually soulmates. That's how people treat it. Which is horse shit, really, but you wouldn't know that the way everyone talks.

In point of fact, the only person who doesn't talk that way is his grandfather. He has no time for romance, and barely any truck with omegas at all. He doesn't seem to care whether or not Stiles dates. Instead all his focus is on encouraging the hyper-alpha qualities that he idealizes: competitiveness, aggression, strength. It's like he's trying to live out his own alpha fantasies through his grandson.

So Stiles is caught, trapped between the crushing expectations of his grandfather and the tidal wave of assumptions that surge toward him from everyone else and most of the time he feels like he's drowning.

Heats are the moment when it's worst though, when all that conflict and guilt seems to crystalize. He's read online that most alphas enjoy their heats, but he can't say the same. Maybe it would be different if he had someone he cared about to take him through it. If he could just be allowed to be who he is without that writhing sense of unease and guilt. In his darkest moments he wishes he could flick a switch and untwist everything inside himself. Uncomplicate it. If he could just find the mythical omega who's gonna fix him-- then he could embrace it, and be like everyone else.

No omega arrives though, so he tries to bury what he is, to ignore it. But every time his heat rolls around it all bubbles to the surface again.

It's only once he's in college and put some distance between himself and all the people that he cares about, all the people he's convinced he'll disappoint, that he figures out a way to walk that line. Sex with other alphas. No relationships. But sex he can do. Sex is fun. It's a release.

He can make his peace with that.

It helps relieve the pressure that's building inside of him, even if it doesn't fix the ache in his chest.

-

The elevator in Derek's building doesn't work so they trail up three flights of concrete stairs that stink of abrasive chemical cleaner, before Derek finally turns off into a hallway that's dimly lit, it's walls a dull brown. They pass a couple of doors, there's music blaring from one and an argument coming from another. When Derek finally stops outside a faded green door, he hesitates, eyes darting to Stiles and away, his shoulders curled over defensively.

"This you?" Stiles prompts.

With a curt nod, Derek fishes a key out of his pocket, places it in the lock and turns it.

The door swings open into a narrow hallway, and Stiles follows Derek through, letting the door slam shut behind them. He treads down the heel of sneakers, kicking them off, leaving them next to Derek's chucks. In socked feet they wander through to the living room, which is-- well, it's small. A sagging couch, an armchair, an ancient TV, that looks like it was bought fifteen years ago, and a couple of bookcases are all crammed snugly

together. On the walls are pictures, mostly photos, probably of Derek and his family, although Stiles can't tell from this distance; there are an abundance of house plants dotted about, and a homemade quilt over the back of the sofa. Homey touches, that make it feel welcoming.

It's the scent, though, which catches Stiles' attention and almost makes his knees give way. That warm, musky smell that he associates with Derek, the one that has always tied his stomach in knots, is so ingrained here it makes gooseflesh break out on his arms.

"Nice place," Stiles says, breathing through his mouth and trying to pull himself together.

With a shaky exhale, Derek swallows. He won't quite meet Stiles' eyes. "This way," he says, and that's when it really hits Stiles-- they're going to Derek's room. Derek's *bedroom*. A place he feverishly fantasized about during in virtually every heat he experienced in high school. He rubs his palms on his jeans, because suddenly they're sweating.

Unsurprisingly, given the rest of the apartment, the bedroom is tiny. A narrow room with no room for more than a bed, a small closet and a chest of drawers. It's a lofted bed, though, which means there's space for a desk and chair underneath with a little bookshelf tucked away next to it.

Derek goes straight to the chest of drawers and starts to rifle through it, while Stiles takes the opportunity to have a look around. He ducks under the bed, crouching down to take a closer look at the bookshelf. Recognizes names like China Mieville and William Gibson, even though he hasn't read them. But he has read--

"You like Harry Potter?"

Derek turns to look at him. "You don't?"

"Eh. I watched the movies. They were okay."

"The movies?" Derek looks horrified.

“Joking. I mean. I’m not joking. I watched the movies and I liked some of them, but I read the books first.” Stiles says, with a shit eating grin. “Which was your favorite?”

“Book?”

Stiles nods.

“Hmmm.” Derek tilts his head to the side, considering. “Prisoner, I guess. It feels like the most complete story, it’s tightly plotted, and JK’s editors weren’t too scared to edit at that point so--”

“But Goblet of Fire has dragons.”

“Yes,” Derek says, frowning. “Dragons. In a school. As part of a competition to win a magical cup. A competition that has literally *killed* previous competitors. Dumbledore is an ass.”

“Dumbledore is awesome,” Stiles says. “Besides, are you seriously complaining about the lack of realism at the make believe magical school?” He turns back to the bookshelf and sees several tired looking journals standing in a row next to The Deathly Hallows. Without thinking he reaches out and runs his fingers along the spine of one.

Immediately Derek’s there next to him, and his hand closes over Stiles’ own, stilling him.

“What?” Stiles says, even though he knows.

“That’s personal.” He can feel the weight of Derek’s stare on him, the warm, firm pressure of his touch.

“Sorry,” Stiles says, flushing, and finally meeting Derek’s gaze. “I didn’t mean-- I wasn’t thinking. I wouldn’t have tried to read your diary.”

Derek lets go of his hand and passes him a charcoal henley. Stiles accepts it without thinking, his fingers clenching the soft cotton tight.

“They aren’t diaries,” Derek says with an almost smile, then he half rises, ducks out from under the bed and stands.

Stiles follows his example, stooping a little to avoid hitting his head on the underside of the bed, then straightens to stand opposite Derek. Like this they’re close, maybe a foot between them, and Stiles is suddenly conscious of the fact that his t-shirt is tacky, it bore the brunt of everything that happened in the alley, and it feels sticky and cold against his stomach. He should take it off, but he’s all off kilter, distracted.

“What are they then?” he blurts, eyes flitting back to the journals. He clutches the henley tighter in his fist. Derek’s scent is so concentrated in this place it’s-- he feels high with it. He sways forward a little, breathing in through his nose, helpless to it.

“I--” Derek hesitates, exhales slowly. “I write.”

“You write?” Stiles blinks. “What do you write?”

“Stories.”

Stiles glances back down at the journals, oddly fascinated. “You planning to be next JKR?”

“Maybe,” Derek says evenly. “Why the fuck does it matter to you?”

The sharp edges of Derek’s words cut through the fog of Stiles’ hormones and he smirks, feels strangely comforted. Confident even. This he knows. This is familiar. Without a second thought he peels off his come covered t-shirt, and Derek immediately averts his gaze.

“Literally just jacked you off in the alley outside your apartment, dude,” Stiles says, balling up his t-shirt and dropping it to the floor. “Seems a bit weird to get all... uptight on me now.”

“I’m not--” Derek says, but the tips of ears are red. Still, he responds to the challenge in kind, juts his chin a little and makes a point of dragging his eyes over Stiles’ bare chest almost belligerently. When Stiles pulls on the

borrowed henley, Derek's eyes flutter shut, his shoulders roll back, nostrils flaring and Stiles doesn't miss the fine tremor that seems to pass through him.

"Smell good?" Stiles asks, voice a little rough. He takes a step towards him. When Derek opens his eyes again his pupils have swallowed his irises whole. He nods jerkily.

Reaching out Stiles slides one hand over Derek's shoulder, mind already racing through all the ways he could still take him apart. Derek leans into the touch, steps closer still. Reaches out a hand--

The sound of a door slamming shut echoes from somewhere in the apartment, and they both spring apart.

"Is anyone here?" calls a woman's voice.

"It's my mom," Derek says, he takes a step back and shakes his head like he's trying to clear it. "Shit. *Shit.* "

"Are you there, Derek? Cora?"

"I'm in my room," Derek calls. Ducking down he picks out a random book from the bookshelf and then scrambling up again he shoves it into Stiles' unresisting hands. Then he grabs Stiles' balled up shirt from the floor and jams it in his laundry basket, just as the door opens.

"There you are, I was just-- Oh, hello!" Stiles recognizes Derek's mom, a petite beta with copper colored hair. She opens the door, and glances first at him, then at Derek. "I'm sorry, sweetie," she says, "I didn't realize you had a friend here."

"Yeah--um. This is--uh-- this is Stiles." Derek falters a little over his name, glancing nervously at Stiles as he says it.

Stiles gestures between himself and Derek. "We knew each other from high school."

“Stiles. Stiles. Stiles! Of course. Stiles Stilinski! Oh yes! I remember now. I remember--oh. Oh.” She pauses mid sentence a slightly concerned look passes over her face and Stiles plasters a wide smile over his own.

In unison they both turn to look at Derek who blurts out. “We both went out for drinks with Kira. Then he gave me a lift home. He just came up to borrow a book.” Derek gestures to the book he placed in Stiles’ hand, and for one fleeting moment Stiles is really impressed by how cool Derek’s being about this. How well he’s thinking on his feet. Then Derek goes and ruins it by tacking, “That’s all,” on the end, in a really defensive tone, and his mom looks between them curiously.

“Yeah,” Stiles says immediately, shooting Derek a look that he hopes says, *be cool, man. Be cool.* “Yeah. That’s all.” An awkward silence descends between the three of them, and Stiles takes it as his cue. “Well--I--um-” His eyes jump to Derek. “I should be getting back. This was-- fun.”

“Yeah.” Derek echoes. “Fun.”

Stiles almost smiles then, fighting a sudden and wildly inappropriate urge to laugh. Instead he bites his lip, then says, “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Hale.”

“Call me Lisa,” she says with a small smile. “Nice to meet you too, Stiles.”

“Okay, nice to meet you Lisa.” He turns to Derek. “Yeah, and uh, thanks for the shir--book. Book. The book.” He waves the book in his hand to prove his point. “Later, Hale.”

“Stilinski.” Derek’s gaze is weirdly intense.

As Stiles makes his way down the hall to get his shoes, he hears Lisa say to Derek, “Honey, did you-- rip your best shirt?” in a tone of utter confusion. “What happened?”

Stiles jams his shoes on his feet and hurriedly lets himself out.

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Three days pass. Stiles sleeps in as late as he can get away with, crawls out of bed to half-assedly attack the backyard, and where he can, picks up a couple of shifts at the cinema, where he used to work in high school. In between, he reads the book Derek lent him: *Kraken*, by China Mieville, which is, well, weird. Not bad necessarily. But definitely weird.

Stiles' grandfather is unimpressed by his faltering progress on the yard, and makes more than one pointed comment about it, but in truth, Stiles is distracted. He wears Derek's shirt under his own most days, and more time than he's willing to admit is spent locked in the shower, or lying in bed at night clutching the henley to his face, breathing in their combined scents and reliving the events of that one evening. He can't get it out of his head, can't stop fixating on it; soon the memory isn't enough, and he gets restless, like there's an itch under his skin that he can't quite scratch.

He wants to see Derek again, wants to do more than just see him. The urge is so strong that most days it's all he can think about. Fortunately by day three he has an easy in, he's finished the book Derek gave him and he tells himself he should do the right thing and return it. True, he could just post it back through the mail slot at Derek's apartment, but he rejects that idea out of hand, because, well, he's still working on the backyard and there's stuff he could buy at the nursery, right? So rather than make the trip all the way to Beacon Heights, he can just drive out to the nursery, return the book, buy whatever he needs and see Derek face to face. It'll be totally casual. No big deal. Two birds, one stone.

Literally an hour after he finishes the book he's walking through the sliding double doors of the nursery; Kira's mom sees him immediately and greets him with a smile.

"Oh hey, Stiles! Kira said you were back in town!"

"Mrs Yukimura, hi. How are you?"

“Good. How’s college?”

“Good. Good. Yeah. Busy.” He glances around distractedly. “Uh, is Derek around today?”

“Yes, I think he’s out back.”

“Oh,” Stiles’ face falls. “I just need to return this book.” He gestures to the paperback he has clasped tight in his hand.

“You can go find him, sweetie. He’s on his lunch break. I’m sure he’d like to see you.”

“Right.”

“Just go straight to the back, through the double doors, and the break room is the third door on your left.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem!”

Stiles makes his way down an aisle filled with gardening tools and bags of soil and through the double doors at the back of the store. When he peers through the wired glass window of the break room door he thinks for a second it’s empty save for cheap plastic garden furniture that have clearly been set aside for staff use, but then Derek hoves into view clutching a coffee cup in one hand and one of those weathered looking journals in the other. He takes a seat at the table, then glances up and startles when spots Stiles’ face at the window.

Stiles pushes the door open immediately. “Hey,” he says, with a grin.

“Uh--” Derek says blankly. Reaching out he grabs the edge of the table, half standing to his feet. “S-Stiles. What are you doing here?”

“Returning your book.” Stiles waves it jauntily in the air.

Derek's eyes dart down to the copy of *Kraken*, and then back up again, expression morphing from confused to skeptical. He lowers himself back into his seat, hands still gripping the table edge. "You *read* it?"

"Squid worshipping cult? It was kind of weird. I'm not sure if I liked it or not."

"It's probably my least favorite of his," Derek admits distractedly. "I just grabbed it at random. I didn't expect you to read it--" He trails off as Stiles slinks across the floor towards him, places the book carefully on the table, then drums his fingers against cover. Derek watches every movement, and Stiles sees the moment he inhales, the way his eyes widen as they flick to the charcoal henley that's just visible under Stiles' plaid shirt.

Derek's knuckles are white, his fingers tighten their grip on the table, there's the sound of plastic snapping.

"So," Stiles says, with a smirk. "How long is your break?"

Derek doesn't answer, just jumps to his feet and pretty much manhandles Stiles from the room.

He drags him down the corridor and through the doorway to the staff bathroom, slams the door shut behind them, then locks it. When he turns around Stiles is already on him, grinning maniacally as he pushes Derek up against the door. His hands run over the broad expanse of Derek's chest--he's wearing that fucking blue apron again, and Stiles reaches round and tugs the knot loose; Derek rips the apron over his head and tosses it to the side, panting harshly, his eyes wide and wild, hands hovering like he isn't quite sure what to do next.

Reaching down, Stiles cups him through the fabric of his jeans, and Derek closes his eyes, arches into the touch, swearing under his breath.

"Like that, huh?" Stiles says, fingers mapping out the length of him through the denim. He's thick and growing thicker in Stiles' hand.

Derek doesn't answer, one hand sliding round Stiles' waist, pulling him in, the other round his neck, roughly cradling the back of his head, dragging him closer, head angled like he's gonna kiss--

"Fuck," Stiles hisses, ducking his head out of Derek's grip. He needs to actually look at the zipper, his fingers fumble it down and he pops the button on Derek's fly open. Derek leans in, scruff scratching at the sensitive skin of Stiles' neck as he takes in these great shuddering hot breaths that makes all the fine hairs on the back of Stiles neck stand up. Now Derek's stupidly tight jeans are open, Stiles can get his hand on the plain gray boxer briefs Derek's wearing, can feel the heat of his cock bleeding through the fabric, feel the way it strains and twitches under his touch.

He grips it in the curl of his fist as best he can, squeezes firmly and relishes the way Derek shudders. He's so responsive, so sensitive, and if this is how he is with Stiles' hand what would he be like with more? What would he be like if Stiles--

Pulling back a little from where he's all but supporting Derek against the wall, Stiles asks, "Can I blow you?"

Derek blinks at him, eyes heavy lidded. He seems to lean forward a little, swaying like he's drunk on Stiles' scent. "Wha--?"

One hand placed firmly on Derek's chest anchoring him in place, Stiles sinks to his knees, slowly. Eyes on Derek the whole time. "Can I?" he says smirking up at him.

Derek's adam's apple bobs. He nods slowly, eyes a startling shade of green.

This close, Derek's scent is overwhelming. Stiles feels a little light-headed himself. Rocking forward on his knees, almost without thinking he buries his face in the crease at the top of Derek's thigh, nose pressed up against his groin, and breathes deeply, His hands slide down to grip Derek's ass.

"Fuck," Stiles breathes. "You smell so good. I just wanna--" he mouths a little at Derek's cock through the fabric, and feels Derek's hips twitch

forward under the attention. “You ever think about this?” he asks, looking up at Derek.

Derek’s staring down at him, pupil’s blown. After a beat he nods tightly.

The corners of Stiles’ mouth pull up in a smile, and he laves his tongue against the gray cotton of Derek’s boxer briefs. Sucks a little on the head, making a damp patch. “Me too,” he says, and hears Derek swear under his breath.

He slides his hands round and carefully hooks Derek’s underwear down under his cock. It springs up, slapping against his rucked up t-shirt, thick and bleeding heat.

Stiles rises up on his his knees a little and, with one last pointed look at Derek, takes him into his mouth. He drags his mouth slow at first, savoring the taste, the smell. The way Derek clutches his hands into white-knuckled fists. He’s holding himself still, like he thinks if he moves the moment is gonna disappear-- but Stiles isn’t going anywhere.

Stiles bobs his head a few times, experimentally, getting the feel of him. Derek still doesn’t move, doesn’t touch him, but Stiles can feel the tension in him, the way he’s holding himself so tight. Feel the weight of his gaze and the way his muscles are quivering. “Oh my god,” he whispers. “Stilinski. Fuck. *Stiles*. ”

Stiles reaches up, grabs Derek’s hands, places them on his own head, shows Derek what he wants. And Derek’s hesitant at first, his fingers curled in Stiles’ hair as he flexes his hips once, twice, and then, when Stiles moans he whines a little, starts to increase the rhythm, sharp little jabs of his hips like he just can’t help himself.

Stiles’ mouth feels numb, his jaw aches, he feels used, but in the best fucking way. It’s just what he wanted, and he presses the heel of his palm against his own cock, grinding into it furiously. It chafes. Hurts a little. So he raises himself up a little, and fumbles his own zipper open, manages to ease his own cock out. Starts to jack himself off in quick strokes.

It doesn't take long. Derek comes a couple of moments later, and the taste of him sends Stiles tipping over the edge too. For a moment neither of them move, too trembly and wrung out to do anything. Stiles rests his forehead against the crease of Derek's hip and breathes. Derek's fingers unclench from where they've been curled tight in his hair, and then he feels him pet him gently almost hesitant.

Stiles swipes at his mouth, rocks back on his heels. Derek's staring down at him, blinking dazedly, still out of it.

"God. That was just as hot as I always knew it would be," Stiles says.

Derek's finally come round, is tucking himself back into his jeans. "Do you need me to--" Derek glances down at Stiles' spent dick. "Oh."

Stiles jumps to his feet. "Like I said," he grabs a paper towel from the dispenser and wipes himself off as best he can, then tucks himself back in his jeans. "Fucking hot."

Stiles walks to the sink and turns the tap on, washes his hands thoroughly, then splashes water on his face. One look in the mirror tells him he looks like he's been doing exactly what he has-- and he'll just have to hope that Mrs. Yukimura isn't around when he goes back outside.

"Yeah, uh--" Derek shifts from foot to foot awkwardly. "So--uh--what now?"

"Now? I gotta go make a few purchases." Stiles tries to smooth his hair down with limited success. "Y'know, soil and stuff."

"Soil?" Derek seems more alert suddenly. His eyebrows disappear into his hairline. "What are you gonna plant?"

Stiles shrugs. "Flowers? Probably? Or maybe vegetables. I haven't really decided yet."

"You haven't decided, but you're buying soil?"

“What’s the big deal? It’s just dirt.”

Derek’s mouth goes all tight and disapproving. “Different plants need different types of soil, Stiles. You need to decide what you’re going to plant and *then* buy the soil.”

“Really? Oh.” Stiles’ shoulders slump, crestfallen.

“You also want to think about the amount of sun or shade the plants are gonna get, the pH of the soil, the drainage.”

“Ugh. Seriously? That sounds like so much effort. Can’t I just plant a carrot and then it grows and then I eat the carrot.”

Derek looks vaguely amused. “Look,” He scratches his nose. “I-- uh-- if you want some help, I could--?”

Stiles cocks his head. “Yeah, okay, Professor Sprout, that sounds good. What about this evening?”

“I can’t tonight.” He looks genuinely disappointed.

“What about later this week?”

“Well, it’s my day off tomorrow, but my mom needs the car, so--” he blushes.

“I can pick you up,” Stiles says. “Let’s say eight? No. Wait. There’s no way I’m gonna be awake by eight, let alone dressed. Okay, how about nine-thirty?”

“Sure,” Derek smiles slightly.

“Okay, that’s so cool.” Stiles slaps him on the shoulder and winks. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I guess you will.”

“See ya, Hale.”

“Stiles.”

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When he arrives in front of Derek’s apartment building the next day, Derek’s already waiting outside and dressed for business in baggy sweatpants which have a pair of garden gloves stuffed in one pocket, and a loose fitting t-shirt. As soon as the jeep pulls up he lopez across and slides into the passenger seat.

“Morning, Professor,” Stiles says with a yawn.

“Rough night?”

“Yeah. I stayed up marathoning this random anime. It was weirdly compelling. I still don’t know if I understood *exactly* what was happening, because the subtitles weren’t great-- but I couldn’t stop.”

Derek sighs and shakes his head, “You’re ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously attractive, right?” Stiles waggles his eyebrows, and Derek ducks his head and grins.

“Ridiculously something,” he murmurs.

They drive to Stiles’ place and it’s easy. Easier than the last time they were in a car together. There’s no awful tension, no crippling anxiety. Stiles is feeling pretty upbeat, with any luck he’ll get the backyard sorted and get laid today.

When he parks up in his driveway Derek doesn’t move to get out straight away.

“You OK?” Stiles asks turning to look at him.

“Yeah,” Derek blinks. “Yeah. I’m just-- it doesn’t matter.”

Stiles squints at him, the slight flush on his cheeks, the way his teeth are worrying his bottom lip as he stares at Stiles’ house. “Never thought you’d end up here, huh?” Stiles asks. “Don’t worry, I’ll give you the full tour.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“Dick,” Derek says, but he’s smiling.

“Later,” Stiles says, “We should try and work on the backyard at least a little first.”

Derek gives him a Look, but climbs out of the Jeep and follows Stiles to the front door, and then into the house.

It is kind of weird, Derek being here. Stiles feels it as he leads him out to the kitchen, this weird feeling of disconnect. Derek Hale is in his house. Derek Hale is in his kitchen. Two days ago he had Derek’s dick in his mouth.

Fuck. He’s feeling horny.

“So, uh--” Derek swallows. “Is your grandfather around?”

“Nah,” Stiles makes a face. “He’s out fishing with some buddies from his gun club. They’ll be gone all day.”

“Huh.” Derek’s eyes dart to Stiles’ and hold his gaze a moment. “That’s uh--”

“Yeah.”

The whole house to themselves. He could fool around with Derek in his bedroom. He could--

“I should take a look at the backyard,” Derek says, clearing his throat. He

has this little smirk on his face though, like he knows exactly where Stiles' mind was going, and as he walks past Stiles to the back door, he brushes just a little too close, the scent of him rich and heady. Stiles feels gooseflesh break out all over, and follows him immediately.

When Derek tries the handle, the back door is locked, and Stiles can't help himself, he presses right up against Derek, his front to Derek's back, chin hooked over Derek's shoulder and reaches round with his keys. "Here," he says, voice coming out a lot huskier than it normally does. "Let me."

He puts the key in the lock, turns it, and the door swings open.

Derek sucks in an uneven breath. "Thanks," he says, and after a beat walks forward into the yard.

Stiles watches him. The impossible sight of Derek Hale in sweatpants standing in his backyard looking around himself. It's kinda cool.

"So," Stiles says, "Whaddya think?"

"You thought you were ready for soil?" Derek asks, turning to look at him.

"Yeah! What? Why?"

"The beds at the back are a mass of brambles."

"Yeah," Stiles says, "But I cut the grass? And look, the bit under the kitchen window is clear." He gestures behind him, and Derek's eyes widen a little as they take in the small patch of ground that has taken Stiles two whole days to clear, in between fantasizing about Derek and picking up shifts at the cinema.

"Wow. You're amazing," Derek says dryly, raising one eyebrow.

"I try--" He has tried. For a whole five minutes. But it's no good. He really wants to take Derek back inside and--. "Seeing as you think I'm so amazing," he says, slinking over to Derek. "Maybe--"

“No.”

“No?”

“We are working on your backyard.”

“For real?” Stiles is not whining, but it’s a close run thing. “Couldn’t we just fool around a little bit first--”

Derek scratches his chin. “You have that shovel you bought the other day?”

“Yeah,” Stiles’ shoulders slump. “It’s in the garage.”

“Well go get it, and anything else that might be useful.” Derek places his palms on Stiles’ shoulders and gently herds him in the direction of the garage.

When he returns he has the shovel and a couple other rusting tools he’s managed to rustle up. Derek sighs deeply and puts him to work.

They go for maybe two hours on the rear beds, clearing brambles, pulling up weeds and removing stones. As the morning wears on the sun creeps higher and higher in the sky and Stiles feels sweat start to bead on his upper lip and the nape of his neck. Even Derek seems to be feeling it, because at around eleven he heaves a big sigh and peels off his t-shirt revealing nothing but a white tank top underneath. Stiles almost swallows his tongue.

“Uh--um,” he says, as he watches Derek stretch, pulling the tank top up a little to wipe at his face and revealing a toned stomach with an actual six pack. “I. Uh.” Derek looks across at him. “Drink?” Stiles manages. “You want a drink?”

“Sure.”

Which is how they end up, grimy and sweaty, standing in Stiles’ kitchen drinking bottled water while Stiles tries not to stare at Derek’s chest too much.

“We’re doing pretty good out there.”

“Yeah,” Stiles echoes. “Good.”

Derek lifts his bottle of water to his lips and glances over at Stiles a little sly. “Everything ok?”

“Fine,” Stiles cuts another glance at him out the corner of his eyes, and decides he isn’t hiding anything. They both know he finds Derek attractive so he may as well lean into it. “Fine,” he says again. “Everything is fine. Reaaaaal fine.”

Derek ducks his head, like if he does that Stiles won’t see him laughing. “You’re such an ass.”

Stiles gives a one shouldered shrug and lifts his bottle of water to his lips again, grinning. He takes a long sip and as he does he glances out the kitchen window. “Backyard’s not looking too bad,” he says. “We make a good team.”

“Yeah,” Derek says, and his voice sounds a lot closer than it did a few seconds ago. Stiles startles and looks back to see Derek’s placed his drink down and moved to stand directly in front of him. This close he smells amazing. His scent strong and sweaty and alpha, seeping into Stiles home and mingling with his own. Derek takes another step towards him. “Yeah, we do.”

Stiles lifts his eyebrows, but he places his own drink down on the counter and reaches out with one hand curling his fingers through Derek’s belt hoops and pulling closer. “So, Hale. Wanna fuck?”

Derek’s brow crinkles. “Not quite what I had in mind.”

“Then what? Handjobs? Or do want me to blow--”

Derek cups Stiles’ face with both hands and kisses him, gently, so gently. His lips soft but insistent as they move across Stiles’ own.

All Stiles' breath seems to leave his body in one big whoosh, and he feels his knees buckle just a little. He has to reach out behind him and grab onto the counter for support. He doesn't quite know what to do-- how to respond. For what feels like an age, he stands there, lips parted, paralyzed by shock.

A moment later, Derek breaks the kiss and leans back just a little, lets his hands slide down and back, until one is on Stiles' waist and the other cradles the back of his head. "Fuck," he whispers, leaning his forehead against Stiles'. "I've been wanting to do that for a long time."

Stiles blinks, mouth still ajar. "I--uh--um--"

"Are you okay?"

After a beat Stiles nods. "I mean it's uh-- it's no blow job, but--"

Derek grins, his thumb tracing an idle patterns in the fine hairs at the back of Stiles' neck. "You really *are* kind of an asshole," he mutters and he leans in to kiss Stiles again.

This time Stiles responds in kind, slow, lazy, kisses, hot breath mingling, fingers curling tight in the fabric of Derek's tank top but not trying to go under and touch skin. It all feels, unhurried and impossibly tender, a level of affection Stiles hadn't realized he was missing, but now he has it he suddenly realizes he's starving.

When they finally break apart again they're both breathing heavily. Derek is pressed up against him and they're both hard, shifting against each other lazily without intent.

"We should probably--uh--" Stiles trails off, blinking hard. He may have forgotten what words are.

"Get back to work?" Derek suggests, just as Stiles gathers enough of himself together to say, "Take this upstairs?"

Derek smirks a little, his hips shift with a little more purpose, and Stiles can barely suppress a shudder. "Upstairs?"

“Or down here,” he mumbles. “Here could be good too,” and he leans in to kiss Derek again.

This time their focus has shifted and Derek seems intent on backing Stiles up against the counter as far as he’ll go, it’s digging into the small of his back, a dull, persistent pain that he uses to try and anchor himself, because the little shifts of Derek’s hips and the way their sliding up against each other even through layers of material is slowly driving Stiles out of his goddamn mind.

Gradually it becomes more urgent, the slow grind of their hips, becoming steadier, more purposeful, their kisses becoming a little rougher, the breaths harsher. With Derek’s scent all around him and the feel of his lips, the slide of his cock, perhaps it shouldn’t catch Stiles off guard when he starts to feel a familiar sensation begin to coil in his stomach, begins to feel his cock start to swell at the base. It shouldn’t, but somehow it does.

“Fuck,” he hisses in surprise, burying his face into the meat of Derek's shoulder. “Oh god. That-- you--”

He’s never knotted in front of someone before. Never even felt the impulse. It’s normally something that only occurs in heats or sometimes alone at night in his more detailed fantasies. But then-- he’s never made out with Derek. He’s never--

At that precise moment, as he teeters on the point of no return, there’s the sound of keys turning in the front door. In the relative quiet of the house, with nothing but their muffled breathing and bitten off moans it may as well sound like a gunshot to Stiles.

Without a second’s hesitation he pushes Derek away hard as he can, hissing low, “Get the fuck off me.” He sends Derek staggering back a few steps, hurt and confusion writ large on his face.

Stiles slaps a hand over his mouth, eyes wide, heart beating loud and scared in his ears. A moment later he hears his grandfather call, “You here, kid?”

“Yeah,” Stiles calls, offering Derek a slightly pleading expression. Although he couldn’t say what he was asking for. “I thought you were out fishing for the day with your gun club buddies?”

Feet sound in the hallway, but thankfully his grandfather doesn’t come through. “Yeah, but Jack’s goddamn pickup broke down and we had to get it towed. God, I need to piss.” Footsteps clomp up the stairs. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Okay?” Stiles calls. He’s shaking. Physically shaking, hands trembling, feels like he’s gonna be sick. Across from Derek is watching him and Stiles can’t parse the expression on his face. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Stiles mumbles, trying to flatten his hair. He wipes his hand over his lips, like he’s trying to wipe away the evidence. At least he isn’t hard any more, thank god. “Jesus. I can’t-- does it look like we’ve been--?”

Derek shakes his head slowly, expression turning carefully blank. He folds his arms across his chest. He won’t meet Stiles’ eyes.

A second later there’s the sound of the toilet flushing and then heavy footsteps on the stairs and then Stiles’ grandfather appears in the doorway.

“The whole fuckin’ day was a bust,” he huffs. Then he seems to notice Derek. “Who’s this?”

“This is--uh.” Stiles swallows.

“Derek,” Derek says, extending his hand. “Derek Hale.”

“We--um-- used to go to high school together.” Stiles chips in.

“Huh.” His grandfather shakes Derek’s hand, eyes flicking over him, taking in every detail. “You an alpha?”

“Yes, sir.”

His grandfather’s lips pull into a thin smile. “You at college?”

“No. I work at the nursery on the edge of town.”

“He offered to come help me with the backyard,” Stiles says.

“Is that so?” His grandfather cranes his neck to look through the kitchen window, and when he glances back at Derek it’s with an approving look in his eye. “Not bad. You play sports?”

“Lacrosse, at high school, but I like baseball too.”

“What’s your team?”

“Cubs.”

His grandfather snorts. “Cubs?”

“My mama’s family was originally from Chicago, so I’ve always been a fan.

“Hmmm.” Stiles’ grandfather doesn’t look convinced. “I guess that’s better than the kid, here. Fascinated by the Mets even though he’s never been to New York.”

“I--” Stiles starts to say.

“They’re a garbage team,” his grandfather says, cutting him off. Stiles ducks his head, chancing a glance at Derek who isn’t looking at him. His posture is tense though.

With that his grandfather walks to the fridge, opens the door. “You want a beer, Derek?”

“I’m not twenty-one yet, sir.” Stiles’ grandfather looks like he’s about to say something, but Derek carries on, “And besides, Stiles already got me a drink.”

With a shrug, Stiles’ grandfather takes a long sip of his beer, and his eyes skate over Derek again. “You know,” he says, “you look real familiar to

me, have we met before?”

“I don’t think so, sir.”

“You say you work at the nursery? Where’d you live?”

“Beacon Heights.”

“Huh.”

“We got into a fight in elementary school, years ago,” Stiles says, “Is that it?”

His grandfather scrutinizes Derek’s face one last time. “Maybe,” he puts his beer down. “No. I don’t think so. I don’t know. It’ll come to me. Now. It’s about lunchtime. Grilled cheese sandwiches, boys?”

“Sounds good,” Derek says, he’s still not really looking at Stiles, and Stiles can’t help but feel that he’s fucked up.

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After they’ve eaten an awkward lunch, he and Derek work on the backyard for another couple hours. His grandfather spends his time standing over them critiquing their (mainly Stiles’) work or wandering inside to watch TV with the volume so loud they can hear every word from the backyard.

Derek doesn’t talk other than to offer Stiles instructions or point out something that needs doing, but Stiles feels jumpy just the same, nervous, like his grandfather will be able to tell what’s happened.

It’s nearly three in the afternoon, and the backyard is looking much clearer, when Derek finally turns to him and says, face perfectly blank, “I should be getting back now.” By then Stiles is about three steps away from a nervous

breakdown.

“Sure,” he says. “I’ll get my keys.”

They say good-bye to Stiles' grandfather who's currently slumped in his favorite armchair with another beer, watching the game. When they finally get into the Jeep and pull away the silence is deafening. Stiles breaks it first.

“I’m sorry about my grandfather.”

“Your grandfather?”

“Yeah, he’s--” Stiles swallows. “A tough customer.”

Derek’s mouth tightens a little. “And what about you?”

“Me? What did I do?”

“Uh-- pushed me away. Told me to ‘get the fuck off you?’”

“I-- my grandfather arrived home. I was about two steps away from knotting in my fucking underwear. I freaked out!”

Derek shakes his head disapprovingly.

“And besides,” Stiles says, stung. “The other day back in your bedroom when your mom--”

“That’s different,” Derek says.

“How?”

“Because we weren’t together then!”

“Together?” Stiles mouth falls open in shock. “What the--” He manages to cut himself off before he says anything too incriminating.

Derek stares at him, and his face has gone very, very pale. “What do you think we’ve been doing?”

The silence follows stretches out between them, long and uncomfortable.

“Stiles?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles says. “I don’t know, Hale. I guess I figured we were two guys with--” he shrugs. “A shit ton of sexual tension, who were working out their issues in ways that are more-- productive-- than those they had previously tried.”

“Huh.” Derek swallows. “Right.”

Stiles fingers grip the steering wheel tighter. “We jacked each other off in an alley, I blew you in a bathroom stall--” his voice sounds weird to his own ears. “It wasn’t--”

“You showed up at my place of work wearing *my* shirt.” Stiles winces, because yeah, Derek may have a point on that one. Derek continues, “You invited me over today.”

“I mean technically you volunteered--”

“Don’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles says after a long moment. “That was shitty of me.”

Derek lifts an eyebrow, but doesn’t say anything, just stares blankly ahead.

“I didn’t--” Stiles continues, “We weren’t on the same page, is all. I--”

“Well we’re on the same page now,” Derek says, voice all tight and brittle. “So don’t worry about it.”

There’s a chasm opening up in Stiles chest, a black abyss yawning under him. The sudden and unbearable thought of this being it, of not seeing Derek again. He can’t let it happen. “I’m sorry. For all of it. Please, Hale, I--”

“It’s Derek,” Derek explodes. “Okay? My name is fucking Derek. Jesus.”

Stiles jerks the steering wheel in shock, jaw clenching tighter. Next to him Derek's hands are balled into fists. They don't say anything for the rest of the drive back to Derek's place. When Stiles pulls up outside, Derek reaches down immediately to unclip his seatbelt, not even looking at Stiles.

"Are we gonna finish talking about this?" Stiles asks.

"Do we need to? You've made your position pretty clear."

"I told you, before we weren't on the same--"

"And I told you: We are now."

"But I--"

"It's fine, *Stilinski* ." At that Stiles jerks back like he's been slapped.

Derek reaches for the door handle and Stiles can't let it end like this. He won't.

"Look--" he says, stretching a hand out, but stopping short of actual touching. "Can we-- Can we fix this? Please. I get it. I'm an asshole. I fucked up. But here's the thing: I also apologized and I-- I know we don't have the best history with this stuff, I know we've both said and done things that hurt each other in the past but, for the record, I do mean it." Then he adds, a little softer, pleading. "I do mean it, Derek. I am sorry."

At that some of the fight seems to leave Derek and eventually he says, "So what do you want this--" He gestures between them. "To be?"

Stiles opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. He's fucking terrified. When he doesn't respond immediately Derek purses his lips, his shoulders slump a little.

"I don't know," Stiles admits. "I'm scared."

"Of your grandfather?"

It would be easy to blame it all on that, and it's definitely a big part of it, but really it's so much more, and Derek deserves the truth. Stiles shrugs.

"Yeah," he admits softly. "I'm scared of him, what he'll say and think, but also--" He can't put it into words. How big this thing between them is. How he knows if he lets it be more than just sex there won't be any coming back from it. Because what he and Derek are together-- it's big and important and kind of terrifying, and it'll change everything, irrevocably.

"Work out what you want, Stiles," Derek says, tone firm, but lacking that hard edge of anger anymore. "Work out what you want from me and don't get back in contact until you know."

Without another word he climbs out of the jeep, and walks to his apartment.

He doesn't look back.

-

When Stiles finally gets home later that afternoon his grandfather is sitting in his barker lounger, watching the game on TV.

"Hale seems like a good kid," he grunts, looking over at Stiles. "It's nice you finally have a buddy who's an alpha."

"Yeah," Stiles echoes. "A buddy. Nice."

He slumps on to the couch in a miserable heap, and they watch the game in silence.

-

Work out what you want. Work out what you want. The words seem to play on an infinite loop in Stiles' brain and he can't switch them off. All that night he lays there in bed, in the dark of his room, thoughts swirling endlessly.

Derek makes it sound so simple. Like just wanting something is enough. Like all those stupid fucking fantasies Stiles used to have as a horny teenage alpha in heat could actually happen-- like there wouldn't be consequences in the real world.

Three o'clock in the morning, with sleep nowhere on the horizon, Stiles switches his lamp on and stumbles out of bed. He opens his closet and digs out a box that sits at the back under bags of old clothes that he's supposed to have sent to goodwill months ago. He sits cross-legged on the floor and opens it.

There's a photograph of his parents on their wedding day, smiling up at him, and another of the time they went camping at Shaver Lake when Stiles was five. There's his old science project from third grade. There's a couple of notes that he and Scott passed to each other in class, that Stiles kept because they still make him laugh. Mostly though, the box is taken up with old sketchbooks. He opens one now. Flicks through the pages. It's been over a year since he drew anything at all-- more than that since he looked at this-- but he knows what he's gonna find.

Picture after picture.

The curve of his lips. The slope of his nose. The severe line of his eyebrows.

It's unmistakable.

Sometimes the lines are rough and careless, like Stiles' was angry with Derek or maybe with himself. Sometimes the lines are crisp and sure. But they're all of him.

Work out what you want.

The truth is life has never been about what *Stiles* wants. If it were, his parents would still be here, and he'd be studying art somewhere, and he'd--

He looks down and traces the sketched outline of Derek's face. In the picture he's looking away, into the distance. Pensive.

The truth is-- Stiles sighs and puts the book down.

The truth is. His parents aren't coming back. And he isn't going to art school. But if he's honest there is one thing he wants--has wanted for as long as he can remember. What is he gonna do with his life? Continue to contort himself into the person his grandfather wants him to be? The person society expects? Or is he gonna reach out and embrace the person he is-- and in doing so the one thing that may actually have a chance of making him happy.

Stiles is afraid, but maybe there are different types of fear.

Some fear makes you cower, weak and helpless, but there's a type of fear makes you brave, makes you fight. There is no true courage without that type of fear. He's only just beginning to realize that.

He packs everything away carefully. Hides it at the back of his closet under the mound of old bags filled with clothes.

The next day when he wakes he skypes Mason.

End Notes

Polish translation of the lullaby Stiles mom sings:

Oh, sleep, my darling,

If you'd like a star from the sky I'll give you one.

All children, even the bad ones,

Are already asleep,

Only you are not.

pączuszk: Pumpkin

Like I said in the beginning, if there's anything you would like me to tag then just say.

The next chapter will be up as soon as I've finished writing it-- xD
Thanks to anyone who leaves comments or kudos. You guys are the best.

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